

Of Lovebugs and Promises

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Category: Avengers, White Collar

Genre: Family

Language: English

Characters: Agent Phil Coulson, Black Widow/Natasha R., Hawkeye/Clint B.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2016-04-11 22:14:06

Updated: 2016-04-23 19:31:01

Packaged: 2016-04-27 18:38:26

Rating: K+

Chapters: 16

Words: 40,260

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Special Agent Phil Coulson of the FBI is competent man when it comes to solving cases. Competent, busy and not at all good with children. But somehow he's found himself tripping into parenthood (again and again and again)...and he really has no idea what to do with that. - - - (So far: Clint, Natasha, Tony, Bruce, and Steve. Chapters get progressively longer.)

1. Clint

(This is a repost of a story I have up on A03 and forgot to add on here.)

This is for QueenOfTheQuill, who I officially hate with the burning passion of a hundred wet kittens. She put this stupid plot bunny in my head and it went and hulked out.

This was supposed to be a ONE SHOT. And then PLOT happened.

Seriously, this is your fault. I had SO MUCH relaxing to do and that's out the window! Thanks for that. T_T

* * *

><p>As with the majority of the...unsettling things that happened in Phil's life, it started with a promise.<p>

"I promise you that I'm not going to make you go anywhere, or with anyone, that doesn't make you feel safe."

The little boy turned his head slowly to look up at him. He blinked up at Phil with large green eyes that looked far too tired, too solemn, for any seven year old to reasonably have before turning to stare forward again. His little hand loosened a little in Phil's grip

but didn't quite let go. "Adults always say that. You don't have to lie to me."

Phil sighed softly and shot a glance over his shoulder at the crime scene. Barney Barton and his associates, Jacques "The Swordsman" Duquesne and Buck "Trick Shot" Chisholm were currently being arrested at their home base for a series of bank robberies across seven states that had somehow resulted in two blow up restaurants (seriously, why was this his life), twelve dead civilians, and five dead field agents.

The boy, Clinton Francis Barton, had been sighted on several surveillance cameras as a scout as well as a distraction. He'd been sighted at every crime scene and it was only from following him that they'd even been able to catch his elusive caretakers. If you could even call them that.

As unflappable as Phil seemed, he was never going to get used to the sort of things he saw as a member of the FBI's White Collar division.

Phil tightened his hold on Clint's hand and knelt down slowly so that he could face the boy. Up close like this, it was harder to not notice how thin and small he was for his age. He clasped Clint's hand in both of his own and brought them up to his chest. "I am not just 'an adult.' I am Special Agent in Charge Phil Coulson and my mother raised me to keep my promises and provide well for those under my care. I will provide you with a safe place if you can help me find it."

Clint's eyes widened and flickered down to Phil's chest. His stood rock still for two solid minutes, save for the slight twitching of the fingers in Phil's hold. He glanced up again, finally meeting Phil's eyes. Gone was the little performer, cocky and dead serious by turns. In his place was someone quiet and shy and uncertain.

"Could..." he fell silent again, turning to stare when the door of the cruiser Barney had been shuffled into snapped closed. He turned back but stared down at his shoes. "Could you...could you be my safe place?" he asked finally.

Phil blinked, years of practice being the only thing that had kept his body from jerking with it. Because, NO. It was a bad idea on so many different levels, starting with his working hours and ending with lack of experience with children even when he'd been a child. He was going to have to work round the clock with Fury just to find a decent foster family to look after the boy for the time being-

"Yes."

Goddammit, Phil.

But Phil was nothing if not skilled at working his way out of impossible situations. He was about to start carefully talking his way out of his mouth's fuckup when Clint smiled. His whole face lit up with it in a way that Phil had always just thought was a metaphor. The boy stood up straighter and his fingers, his tiny tiny fingers, squeezed Phil's tightly. "Thank you." Clint murmured shyly, his lips

rolling as he bit the inside of the lower one.

So Phil had a kid now.

2. Natasha

Technically, Phil was the SAC of the White Collar Crime unit. Technically. That didn't stop the FBI Director Nick Fury from putting him on cases that dealt with international crime. So, it went without saying that Phil has made his share of enemies in his time as an agent.

Like a fraction of the supposedly defunct KGB.

Phil had a great deal of safeguards in place to protect his still fairly new son. Security systems, near microscopic tracers implanted into the boy's skin, hours of training with Clint on keeping himself safe both in and out of the home. Anything and everything he could think of to keep the boy from being used as a means of punishing him for his work with the FBI.

So imagine Phil's surprise to come home late one night and find all of the lights off. Even the lights timed to shut on and off randomly. Imagine his surprise to see, just out of the corner of his eyes, the glint of moonlight off of a gun.

He was less than half a second away from having his gun out and aimed when he heard, "Hey, no, that's Phil. He's the one I told you about." It sounded like Clint. It was obviously Clint.

Dammit, Clint.

Phil reached out slowly for the light switch, only to freeze at the voice of their guest.

"Leave the lights off." The voice was undoubtedly female and alarmingly young sounding. There was a hint of an accent in there as well, something eastern European in the inflections. Russian, maybe? Why would there be a little Russian girl in his hom-

Oh. Oh, well, fuck. _Dammit, Clint._

Phil turned slowly in the direction of the children and slowly raised his hands in the air, placating. "Clint," he said carefully, "come here, please."

"No. He stays by me." Natalia Romanova said, her voice quiet but very much an order.

"Alright. He can stay there. Can you tell me why you're here?" he asked, still calm and easy. There's a long lull then full of hushed whispering. Just as Phil's arms start to get tired, he gets an answer.

"Do...you know who she is?" Clint asked carefully, clearly trying to decide whether or not he should start omitting things.

"He knows who I am. The FBI has been hunting me."

Clint let out a soft pained sound at that and Phil really hoped that his son wasn't so far gone on the older girl. As young as she was, she was still a skilled assassin. Having Clint compromised would make surrendering her much harder. Clint stood up from where he'd been kneeling behind the couch. One hand came to rest on the back of the couch and the other was still mostly hidden behind the couch, clasping Natalia's hand.

"You saved me. You can save her too." Clint said.

Phil forced back a sigh. "It's not that easy. If you knew...what they'd made her do, you'd understand that." he replied.

"I didn't say it'd be easy. But she's ten. And you're Special Agent in Charge Phil Coulson. Your job is to find people like her a safe place because she's young and nice and deserves to be happy no matter what they told her she had to be." he said boldly.

Phil didn't need to see Natalia's face to know she was just as shocked as he was. The sharp turn of the top of her head spoke volumes. "Really. That's my job. Is that so? Who told you that?" Phil asked dryly.

"You did." Clint said with a smirk.

Phil stilled and stared at his kid, his eyes narrowing slightly. That wasn't untrue. "Ms. Romanova. You need to be the one to tell me so."

The girl snorted softly. "_Can_ you? You are just...an SAC. I am wanted by _Interpol_."

Phil slowly went down to his knees and then sat back on his heels. He sat there with his hands folded on his lap silent for twelve minutes, running his mind through case laws, precedents, anything that could apply in this situation. He didn't move or so much as acknowledge the movement of the children, even when Natalia poked her head over the top of the couch and started to watch him. Without letting go of her hand, Clint climbed up over the top of the couch and perched there, watching Phil patiently.

Natalia frowned and tugged on Clint's hand. He glanced down at her. Her head tilted slightly in Phil's direction as she raised an eyebrow.

"He's thinking." Clint whispered. "So he's serious about it. He can help you. I promise."

When Phil finally came out of himself, Natalia had moved from behind the couch to sit next to Clint on top of the couch. Even in the relative darkness, she looked ethereal. Slender and small, she looked as if she'd be better suited to something closer to gymnastics than, you know, killing.

"She's a minor, so even if she were to be held accountable for her crimes, it wouldn't be for long. Her Intel on the KGB could help further decrease her sentence." Clint jerked up but Phil held up a hand to stop him. "There's precedent for...criminal consultants. People who work for the FBI in lieu of prison time. She would be set to a specific radius, usually one to five miles, that she couldn't

travel out of. But she could, ideally, be taken off it in a couple years and be free." he said.

Natalia stared at him a touch wide eyed, something like hope bleeding into her expression. Clint eased back into his seat. "And you'd...look after her, right? She could stay with us, maybe?"

Phil looked from Clint to Natalia before holding her gaze. "If that's what she wants, I could see about getting that approved with the Director." he said.

Her gaze fell away. "And he would just...let you?" she asked, unbelieving.

"He trusts me. And my judgement. If you let me, I can help you."

She glanced up at him again and nodded solemnly.

Clint sat curled up on a long bench, picking at the aglets on his shoelaces. Natalia was curled up next to him, her vibrant red hair tucked up under a wool cap. They may as well have been outside of a principal's office, for all the tension that surrounded them. In all fairness, this was much worse.

"You have got to be kidding me."

Phil folded his hands behind his back and didn't back down. "There's precedent. And she's smart. She can be useful to us even outside her capabilities as an assassin."

Fury's eye narrowed slowly. He leaned forward, steeping his hands over the center of his massive desk. "She's ten." He deadpanned.

"...A hard ten?"

"Phil."

"She's not dumb, she's not naive. Clint got her in here by offering her a chance at redemption, a chance at getting away from becoming the type of monster that Red Room of theirs is grooming her to be. And...if you force her down, if you try to break her, she will run the moment she gets the chance. ...and you will spend the rest of your life regretting it."

Fury stared at Phil silently for an painfully long amount of time before slowly standing up. He came around his desk to stand before Phil, towering over him. "This is on you. Every bad deed, every rebellious act. It's all going to fall on your neck. Are you prepared for that?"

"Yes," Phil said without hesitation. "I trust Clint's judgment. If he trusts her, that's enough for me to."

Fury's eyes narrowed and he glanced over Phil's shoulder at the pair of heads that jerked out of the doorway the moment he looked up. He rolled his eye. "Fine."

A smile crept onto Phil's face. "So. What about her good deeds and accomplishments?"

"Those are on me."

"All of them?" Phil asked with a wry smile.

"I'm letting you keep her, so yeah, all of them." Fury turned his back on Phil and went over to his computer. He pulled up a database and began working his way through it. Ten minutes later a handful of papers whirled their way out of the printer and into a small inbox set up against it. Once the sound died down, Nick slid the stack into a manila envelop.

He stood up once more and handed the envelop over. "Natasha Romanoff Coulson. Officially. Good luck, Phil."

"Thank you, Sir."

"Don't thank me until after puberty."

Phil startled and actually paled. He blinked several times, looking visibly alarmed for the first time in the last 24 hours.

"Oh. Um. So what do I do when..."

"DO I LOOK LIKE I'D KNOW? Get the hell out of my office and read a book, you idiot."

Phil scurried out of the office with the last of his dignity. Which he promptly lost if the way the pair of slightly snickering punks outside Fury's office was any indication.

Natalia - Natasha - looked up at Phil with a hint of a smirk on her face. "Rest assured. I know about the _menses_." she said.

Phil cringed. "Please...don't use that word yet."

"_Menses_? You don't like the word _menses_? But it's an interesting word, right, Nat?"

"Yes, menses is a very interesting word. With a great deal of red bold meaning."

Phil's eye twitched. They were both SO grounded.

3. Interlude 1

So I intend to do a couple of introduction chapters. I may mix in some Day in the Life chapters/Interludes or put those in a separate work.

* * *

><p>The scariest moment in Phil's life came not three days after he'd taken a little boy named Clint Barton into his home.<p>

While Clint was by no means a _difficult_ child, it did quickly become clear how little effort had been put into his care before Phil came along. Clint didn't eat without explicit permission, which in itself was odd. No matter how much time passed, even if the little

boy was listing to one side in his hunger, Clint would always say no if asked if he was hungry. If food was placed before him, he would stare at it and visibly keep himself from reaching for it unless Phil actually ordered him, gently, to eat. Barney Barton hadn't struck him as the type to be that strict with a child, so he imagined that those habits had been instilled in Clint by their partners.

Phil quickly got into the habit telling Clint that they were going to eat now instead of simply offering him food. He even gave the boy the directive to make sure to eat no less than every seven hours in the event that Phil is unable to come home to feed him. That worked quite well, honestly. Clint seemed to enjoy routine, knowing what he needed to do and when he had to do it. Phil was all about organization, so he was all too happy to make up pink, green, and yellow highlighted schedules for the boy to work off of. Clint was incredibly obedient and very eager to please.

Parenting was easy. He didn't even know why he'd been so worried.

That thought obviously jinxed him.

-xxxx-

He woke on that third morning and headed to Clint's bedroom to get Clint up and dressed before they started on breakfast together.

But he wasn't there.

Clint's room, normally alarmingly tidy for a child, was a wreck. The comforter and blanket were atwist and strewn halfway across the room. Several drawers were open and half emptied. The closet was open and half the contents of the top shelf had been swiped off and down to the floor.

Phil just about died.

But Phil worked well under pressure. Seeing no one in the room, he backed up into the hallway and made his way to the living room on silent feet. He grabbed a spare handgun from the bowl of potpourri without even pausing. There was no sign of damage to the living room. Which meant that they had just been after Clint.

Phil checked both the front and back doors. Neither showed signs of a break in. The deadbolts were even still on. Same with the windows, all locked from the inside. So they were still in the house. Despite an expansive search, he couldn't find anyone in the other parts of the house. No one in the kitchen either.

He made his way back to the master bedroom and went through his closets, wondering what kind of person could have made it into his home and taken his child with such ease. Out of the corner of his eyes, he caught sight of a little piece of blue cloth sticking out from under the bed. Carefully, carefully, he knelt down and peered under the bed.

And found Clint.

The boy was curled up under there with his second blanket, sleeping and apparently no worse for wear. Phil blinked at him hard and

quietly placed his gun on his nightstand. He lay down flat on the floor and stared at the boy for a moment before speaking.

"Clint."

Clint's eyes fluttered opened. Noticing Phil mere feet away, he blinked a couple times in sleepy confusion. "Agent Coulson? Why're 'ou on the floor?" he asked.

"Why are you under my bed?"

Clint froze. His eyes went wide and he looked as if he was resisting the urge to bolt. Phil immediately reached out for him and the boy cringed sharply but didn't close his eyes.

Well. That was just lovely. He was going to be donating money to the cellmates of those assholes in the near future, see how that turns out.

Phil slowed his movement, keeping his palm facing out as reached the rest of the way to let his hand rest on Clint's cheek softly. Clint relaxed a little under the touch, his head lying down again. "It's okay. I was just worried. I thought someone had taken you."

"Sorry," Clint mumbled, closing his eyes.

"That's fine. I'm not angry. Are you okay?" he asked. Clint just nodded and didn't provide any explanation for, you know, being under the bed. "Did you have a nightmare?" Phil tried. Clint nodded slowly.

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

Clint's eyes shot open and he stared at Phil as if he'd asked why the boy hadn't shot off a flare inside a china shop. Confusion, horror, alarm.

Which meant Phil was probably going to have to start paying off the guards too. That would be complicated. But so worth it.

Phil shimmied his way under the bed, managing to somehow look somewhat dignified about it. He moved his hand from Clint's head and let it rest on his back. "I promised that I'd be your safe place, right?" Clint nodded slowly. "So let me be that. If something happens, if something scares you, come to me. Anytime. Every time. Come to me. I will never turn you away. Alright?"

Clint smiled shyly and nodded. "Alright."

"Good."

They lay there for a long moment in silence.

"What happened with the drawers?"

"They were too small to sleep in."

"To sleep- What are you, a cat? Why would you sleep in a drawer?"

"Clearly you've never slept in a drawer."

Phil didn't even _know_ _how_ to respond to that.

...And now he was thinking about it. Great. Like he needed more furniture.

4. Interlude 2

****Summary: Phil's doing his best. Don't judge.****

* * *

><p>Virginia "Pepper" Potts was really, really, the best friend that a man could ask for. She was the type of best friend that a man could hide a body with and feel assured in the fact that it wouldn't be found until the statute of limitations had run out. She was the type of best friend that didn't so much as bat an eyelash when you called her in the middle of the afternoon and said, "Things happened. I have a ten year old girl now. How do I dress her?" She was the type of best friend that cleared her schedule and spent the day in the mall with you and your kids as they (yes, _they_) tried on dresses with frills that you were pretty sure could kill a dude.

Pepper Potts was the personal assistant of the CEO of a Fortune 500 company and was probably the most amazing person in the world.

Phil all but collapsed into the couch at home, closing his eyes. Shopping was ridiculous. He was going to give his tailor such a large raise the next time he saw him. Pepper sat down next to him and gave him a supporting pat on the shoulder that was ruined by how bright her eyes were sparkling at his torment. She was wearing a sharp black two piece skirt suit with a pair of red heels, none of which even looked a little wrinkled, let alone as crumpled as he looked and felt at this point.

"...that's not fair." he said, looking her over.

She snorted softly. "Have you _met_ Mr. Stark? I wouldn't be where I was now if I couldn't at least do this." she replied. He chuckled softly and was about to reply when Clint and Natasha came tearing into the room. Clint was chasing Natasha, who was holding one of the teddy bears Phil'd bought for Clint over his head. Both were laughing, which was nice and did not imply any sort of bullying or danger, so he let them be.

That is, until Clint managed to get a lucky hip check in. Natasha spun to keep her balance but it caused her arms to hit a table she had been a little too close to, sending the black china vase that had been resting on it crashing to the floor.

Both children went dead still.

Phil quickly rose from his seat and rushed over to them. Taking them each by an arm, he pulled them two steps back from the debris to make sure that they didn't hurt themselves. He knelt down and looked over Natasha's arm and was pleased to see that there weren't any cuts or bruises. He glanced up at her and realized that her arm wasn't the reason why they were being so quiet.

Her gaze hadn't left the vase.

"Natasha?" Phil said carefully. Her eyes shifted to meet his and the horror on her face died away to a blankness.

Holy shit.

Phil glanced over his shoulder at Clint, who wore a similar, but not quite as sharply blank, expression.

"You're not in trouble." Both children looked up at him, startled. "It was an accident. I'm not angry. Really. I'm just glad neither of you are hurt." he said.

Both stared at him, severely disbelieving. "It looked expensive." Clint said.

"You guys are more important."

Phil hadn't thought it was possible for them to look even more disbelieving, but he was totally wrong there. "Seriously. I'm not angry." At their silence, he sighed. "FINE. Do you want me to punish you? Do you believe you deserve to be punished?"

That earned him a tense silence. Heads down, shoulders hunched, nodding but clearly afraid of what he would do. Phil sighed softly and tried to run his head through all of the punishments his own mother had given him. He had generally been a really good kid (though a rebellious twenty year old) so it took a moment to find something.

"Okay, fine. Give me your hands." he said. Both cringed but offered up a hand each. Phil took a slow deep breath.

He gave them each a slap on the wrist.

When nothing else happened, the children opened their eyes. They stared up at him, then down to their hands, then up at him again.

"...You can't be serious." Natasha said.

"It's a legitimate punishment."

"It didn't even hurt." Clint deadpanned, incredulous.

"I'm not going to physically harm you." Phil said sternly.

"Then it's not really a punishment." Natasha said slowly, as if he were the child in this situation.

"Look, it's not- Okay, if you don't like my punishments, then pick one yourselves!"

"Phil," Pepper said, finally speaking up, "punishments aren't generally something the kids get to vote on." she said, her lips quirking up.

"Fine. How do you think they should be punished?"

Pepper paused thoughtfully, going through her own punishments. "No dessert tonight?"

"We were getting dessert tonight?" Clint asked in confusion.

"That's not really fair though, is it? I got them that for being good during the shopping. They're two separate things." Phil said with a frown. Pepper let out a soft agreeing hum at that. Phil rolled his eyes. See, it wasn't so easy, was it?

"No TV?" she offered.

"For how long?" Natasha asked.

"A day?" Phil offered. Natasha raised her eyebrows at him and, seriously, that was kind of condescending, thank you. "A week." he amended.

Natasha glanced at Clint, who shrugged. "We should have to clean up or something too." he said thoughtfully.

"Right. So no TV for a week and you have to do the dishes for that week." Phil said sternly.

"What about the vase? We're cleaning that up too, right?" Clint asked, glancing back over at the mess.

"No, of course not. I don't want you getting cut." Phil said.

Both children frowned up at him. "But-" they started.

"_NO_. End of discussion." Phil said with authority.

Phil gave himself a mental high-five. Yup. Saved it.

Phil's got this _handled_.

5. Interlude 3

** - Summary: Phil needs to vet his baby sitters a little more thoroughly. - **

** This is dedicated to QueenOfTheQuill's friend, the Princess of the Quill? **

** I was trying to avoid bringing White Collar into this, but they went and put ideas into my head that made it difficult to keep that promise. **

** You don't need to have watched White Collar to understand this chapter. **

* * *

><p>It was one of those ideas that seemed brilliant at the time and turn out to be an utter mess.<p>

Kind of like having children, to be honest.

-xxxx-

In the nineteen months since he'd taken Clint in, the seven months since he'd taken in Natasha, he'd been homeschooling them. It had started off simply enough. Living life on the road with trio of caretakers that gave little thought to their child's physical well being wasn't exactly conducive to a proper education.

Which meant that Clint was significantly far behind. He could read simple things well enough, only in that he could understand simple passages. More complex passages and words could be read back with incredible ease...but he didn't actually understand any of it. So far as Clint was concerned, they were just letters packed together in patterns with no meaning. To make things worse, the child had not been taught to write and his math skills were limited to counting things out aloud or by hand.

Clint embarrassed easily enough as it was with just Phil around to see him struggle. So putting him in a school with other children (likely a year or two younger, all things considered) seemed like a bad idea. So they were playing catch up.

Clint came with Phil to the office everyday and worked his way through the sample workbooks Phil had gotten him. Phil would do his own paperwork, offering hints and support aloud when needed until lunch. After lunch, Phil graded his work, went over what was wrong and how to do it better and then it was back to work. Around mid afternoon, there was quiet time for Clint (he rarely napped, but sometimes he liked to crawl next to Phil's chair and just...meditate? Sleep with his eyes open? Phil had no idea - until his brain felt up for schoolwork again), then a snack and then work again.

There were only a handful of agents that were even aware of the fact that Phil had a child, let alone that he was a product of a case. Really, it was just the handful of agents around his level or just below that came to his office routinely.

They were just as alarmed as Phil had been that he had gotten a kid.

Once Natasha came along, Phil simply chose to keep their routine up. Clint like the routine and Natasha didn't seem to particularly like other people, so letting things settle seemed like the best bet.

Natasha was just as, if not more so, brilliant as Clint was. She'd simply had the schooling necessary to back it up. So once she joined their little school she took over some of Clint's lessons in addition to working through her own. She taught him Maths (and Russian and German, Phil would later find out) while Phil taught them both English and grammar.

Being the primary caretaker of two small children meant that he rarely took on away missions anymore. Especially when he'd nearly tripped over the two of them, camped out on the floor two feet from the front door, the last time he'd had to go away for a week. Like pets waiting for their owner to come home.

It was an alarming thought. More so when they danced around the

question of how long they'd been waiting there.

So when Phil received a case that required consorting with the White Collar agents from the New York branch, Phil had initially turned it down, assuring Fury that Sitwell could handle the case just as easily and competently as he could. But when Phil returned from the cafeteria later that day, three packed lunches in hand, he found Nick Fury sitting at his desk, regaling his children with stories of all the fun things they were going to get to do in New York.

Phil was seriously starting to develop a twitch.

Phil glared darkly at his boss and former friend for going behind his back. Nick leaned back in Phil's seat and smirked at him. Realizing that their carer was in the room, Clint and Natasha turned to Phil with barely contained excitement. Thankfully, by the time the two were looking at him, Phil had managed to paste on a believable smile.

So they were going to New York.

-xxxx-

"Phil! Nice to see you again." Peter Burke said, extending a hand. Phil couldn't help the small smile that crept onto his face. For all the whining that he'd done (in his head), getting to see his old partner was definitely a perk of taking the job.

"Likewise, likewise. How've you been?"

"Oh, good. Busy. You've heard about my CI." he said with a wry smirk.

Phil's lip twitched. "Who hasn't?"

"All good things, I hope?"

Both men looked up at the doorway to see the increasingly illustrious, but still mostly notorious, Neal Caffrey. Phil turned to face Neal and extended a hand for the younger man to shake. "Of course. Mostly." he replied.

Neal chuckled softly as he shook Phil's hand. He glided in around Phil and came to stand beside Peter, peering over his shoulder at the file on the desk, which was quickly snapped shut. Neal frowned and let out a saddened sound.

"Not for you. It's not an art or forgery case, so you're not needed on this one." Peter told him.

"Okay...then what am I supposed to do today? Do...do I get the day off?" Neal asked, looking slightly confused but hopeful nonetheless.

"Actually...there was something I was hoping you could help us with today." Peter said with a growing smirk. Neal leaned back a bit on his heels, clearly apprehensive.

"I'm babysitting?"

"We don't need a babysitter, Phil! Nat and I can take care of ourselves!" Clint protested, fists curling up.

Phil raised an eyebrow at that and Clint paused for a moment before regaining his composure. "We haven't had time to arrange for a place to stay, alright? And I didn't want to leave you in an unfamiliar office building in an unfamiliar city without supervision." he said. Phil went down to both knees to make direct eye contact with his children. "It's just for today and Neal's very nice. You'll be fine."

Clint and Natasha stared at Neal disapprovingly. Neal raised his eyebrows at them and gave them a small finger curl of a wave. Phil sighed. "Neal Caffrey is a criminal consultant that works with Agent Burke."

That got their attention.

"What did you do?" Natasha asked, looking him up and down. She was clearly doubtful of the man before her being capable of anything requiring prison time.

"Art, gem, bond theft and forgery. Allegedly."

"Allegedly?" Clint asked.

"They can't prove most of it. ...Assuming it was me who did it, of course." Neal added, with a sidelong glance at the FBI agents.

"Wow." Both murmured, impressed despite themselves. Clint looked back up at Phil. "Okay. Just be safe?" he said.

Phil nodded and gave them a smile before leaving, fighting against every urge in his body that told him to grab his children and run for the hills.

He should have listened.

Neal stared down at the kids, who stared back at him. They stood in silence for several moments before Neal finally broke it. "Well, then...want to play a game?"

-xxxx-

Phil couldn't help but be relieved that he and Peter had been able to apprehend the Chess Master with no casualties and little struggle. They had always made an amazing team.

Phil crossed his arms as he watched the numbers increase on the panel inside of the elevator. "How's Elizabeth?"

"Great. Gets along a little too well with Neal, but...well you've met him." Peter said with a shrug.

"He seems nice though. More genuinely friendly than I'd expected."

"Just makes it harder to keep him in line, though. Like punishing our dog, Satchmo. You know he knows better, but..."

"...Hard to say no to that face." Phil finished.

Peter nodded and sighed, standing up straighter when the door beeped and opened on their floor. Oddly enough, there was a line of agents leading up to Peter's office. Both stared at the scene with increasing dread.

"What are the chances that Neal has nothing to do with this?" Peter asked, eyes narrowing.

Phil didn't bother to answer. The answer was painfully obvious. So instead, he gave Peter a supporting pat on the shoulder. Peter took a slow deep breath and steeled himself.

"Okay, people! Make way, please. I'm sure you've got actual work to do. And if you don't, I'll be happy to find you some." Peter said as he nudged his way through the line of scattering agents as he made his way up the stairs.

"Shi- Shoot. Okay, one more time!" Jones was saying when Peter entered his office. It was like a mini street corner in there. Natasha was sitting at Phil's desk playing the shell game with three paper cups and a bullet (...where did she get- who would even give her a bullet?) against Jones. Neal was at her shoulder, grinning the shark-like grin of the coach of a prize fighter against a rookie. Clint was nowhere he could see.

"Do you have money for it?" the little girl asked sternly.

"Yeah, hold on-" Jones said, pulling out his wallet. He frowned into it. "Crap. I thought I had more cash in here. ...Do you take cards?"

"No-"

"_Yes_, of course we take cards!" Neal said, interrupting her. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a card reader and attached it to his phone. "Here you go!" he chirped, extending the phone. Jones was about to run his card ("Only five bucks this time.") when it was yanked out of his hands.

All three startled at the sight of Peter and Phil.

"Uh, hey, boss!" Jones said sheepishly. Peter raised an eyebrow and handed the card back, jerking his head in the direction of the door.

Once Jones had made himself scarce, Phil spoke. "Where's Clint?"

"Right here!" came Clint's voice. He crawled out from under Peter's desk and waved at Phil.

Phil stared at his children for a moment before turning his darkening expression towards Neal. "We were gone for four hours."

"And you turned them into hustlers." Peter deadpanned.

Neal held up his hands, placating. "NOT hustlers. No cheating

here."

"You don't think picking your marks' pockets as they lose what they've already bet legitimately is cheating?" Phil asked.

"_What_" Peter seethed as Neal's eyes went wide.

"W-Well, _technically_, it's not cheat-" Neal cut himself off when Peter pointed his finger sharply at him. Peter shook his finger at Neal and then pointed to Neal's desk outside.

"_Right_. Okay. I'll just..." Neal said. He made a silent half clapping motion and pointed to his desk, skirting around the two agents as he made his temporary escape.

The four of them stood quietly.

"Do we have to give back the money?" Clint asked.

Phil paused thoughtfully. "You have to give back the money you stole. ..Which was _wrong_. Do not do it again. But...you can keep the money you won."

Both brightened though Peter gave him an incredulous look. "Really? You're going to let them keep that money?"

"Anyone that plays against Neal, by proxy or otherwise, was throwing that money away anyway. And games don't buy themselves."

Peter snorted softly, amused. "So you don't mind if Neal babysits next time you're in New York?"

"_No_. No. I'm leaving them with Pepper."

Clint made his way around the desk with their two alarmingly full boxes of cash. He left one with Natasha and was about to leave the room with the other when Phil stopped him. He leaned down to the boy's ears. "Watches and rings too. Give them all back." he whispered.

Clint's shoulders slumped, his head falling back as he sighed long and deep. "'_Kaay_'."

6. Interlude 4 - Tony, Almost

After the New York incident, Phil tried to really knuckle down on the whole "not leaving his children without decent supervision for longer than necessary" thing. Though he was oh so very _kind_ enough to talk Natasha and Clint into playing a couple games against Fury so that he could truly understand the gravity of the situation.

Nick understood. He didn't like it, but he understood.

So when three CIA agents were found nicely packaged in the brand new freezers of several reasonably alarmed civilians, Phil made sure to take the time to choose a competent, amazing, talented individual to look after his so-called delights from above.

Pepper Potts, as it turned out, was a much better babysitter than

Neal Caffrey in so far that she wasn't actually worse.

The decision to leave Clint and Natasha with Pepper had basically come down to three things:

One, Clint and Natasha actually liked Pepper. That, in itself, spoke volumes. After the lives they'd lived thus far, it was important to Phil that he be able to leave them with someone that didn't have them counting the seconds until he returned. Or, alternatively, taught them bad habits.

Two, no one else seemed capable of handling them. Phil's tried going the normal babysitter route. He would let them trial his regular work days to see if things worked out, leaving the two at home with a (severely vetted) child care specialist and a list of instructions for both the caretaker and the kids. The kids' instructions, no matter how strict, would always be followed to the letter. But, somehow, they still always managed to drive people off. Either through elaborate pranks or simply by being themselves. Clint and Natasha, as they were around strangers and/or civilians, are apparently rather unsettling.

Phil couldn't see it. While odd at times, they were kids. Amazingly calm, generally obedient, and a touch mischievous sure, but children nonetheless.

Three, Pepper had experience with children (with a child, one child. Which was more than Phil had had before he got Clint, so he counted that as a win). Tony Stark was the child of Pepper's boss, the industrious Howard Stark. Howard, as ...nice (sort of? Phil couldn't tell whether or not he liked the man half the time) as he was, wasn't really father material. Maria Stark was only a step or two better in that regard. Which meant that Tony spent most of his time in the care of their butler, Jarvis. On the days where it became necessary for Tony to come in (specific photo shoots, press conferences, etc.), it was Pepper who looked after him.

Tony was a genius and his heir. That seemed to be as far as Howard's relationship with the three year old got. He got the distinct feeling that Howard was really just hoping and waiting for the time when Tony would be an adult that he could talk and drink and science it up at full throttle with.

Which was a shame, really. As hyper and crazy and TONY as the boy was, there was still a great deal of charm and kindness under it all.

Which isn't to say that Tony was a remotely easy child. The boy was like a squirrel on catnip laced with crack. But Tony was smart enough to know what his father liked, to know to stay still and smile and be the amazing Stark prodigy on camera. He was smart enough to know to not whine or grouch in public when he was tired or sad or stressed.

Anthony Edward Stark, at three years old, was smart enough to know to never be anything less than who he wasn't except for when he was alone.

But for Tony, being with his actual caretakers was better than being alone. He could run, he could jump (to some extent), he could even

show them the super amazing robot dog that barked and had laser eyes that he had just built! From them, he received the attention and the love that he craved. In smaller doses than he'd have liked, but it was there all the same.

Pepper was especially good at Tony wrangling. With a single stern call of his name from anywhere in the room, Pepper could have Tony skidding to a halt and sitting immediately with his head turned in her direction, waiting for orders. Said with fondness, that same word could have the little boy running over to sit on her lap and chatter to (or at) her until he fell asleep while she took care of paperwork, his hands always busy with one project or another.

Phil was pretty sure it was some form of magic or drugs. He was too polite to call her out on it.

So, considering her track record and the fact that looking after Clint and Natasha could not be anywhere near as difficult, Phil left his children with Pepper with nary a worry in his heart.

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He entered Pepper's office two days later and was vaguely (only vaguely, thank God) alarmed by what he saw.

Clint was sitting on top of a bookshelf shooting at Tony with a Nerf gun while the little boy dashed his way through a surprisingly complex obstacle course. A large plastic mat was laid out on the floor underneath it, so that the jacks, bowls of water, paint and sticky papers traps wouldn't make a mess of the actual floor. Natasha was standing at the end of the course with a stop watch, holding a stick with a pair of clear bottles attached to it by a string. The bottles were taped together at the bottoms and were both filled with unidentifiable clear liquids. Both bottles had red tops.

Once Tony (barely) cleared the obstacle coarse, Natasha dangled the bottles over the panting child. Tony's eyes darted from one bottle to the other before seeming to pick one at random. He unscrewed the top and took a sip. He let out a sound of exhausted delight and grabbed hold of the bottle, chugging it down like a frat at a kegger, before all but collapsing onto the ground. All the while, Pepper just remained seated at her desk, watching them with fascination.

When Clint noticed Phil's presence, he jumped down from the bookcase (no, Clint, no. Why would you do that? It's six feet up) and ran over to Phil. Clint beamed up at him. "Did you see that! He got all the way through in twelve seconds flat this time! He didn't even get fooled by Nat's mystery juices!" he said.

"Yes. I saw. It was...interesting. Good job?"

He was going to get sued one day.

Natasha gave Tony a short congratulatory pat on the head with a nod of approval before making her way over to them as well. She gave Phil a small prideful smile. "He is very intelligent. He may be impressive when he is older." she said, soundly pleased.

Phil was actually a little worried for the kid.

"I'm sure he will be." he said, giving both of his children gentle pats on the head. He went over to Tony, making sure to circumvent the obstacle course, and took the three year old into his arms.

Tony lay in his arms, awake but limp like a slinky, yawning. "Good job, Mr. Stark. How are you feeling?"

Tony perked up a little in Phil's arms, always a little pleased to see him though he never ever acted like it because he totally hated Phil.

Really.

It was an odd sort of relationship, to be honest. According to Pepper, Tony hated him with the burning passion of a galaxy's worth of the brightest blue stars. Those were his exact words. This is because he is another man (aside from his father) that Pepper really likes and that just couldn't be allowed. Pepper was Tony's, didn't he know?

On the other hand, Phil didn't talk down to Tony or treat him like a child. He didn't yell or act exasperated or cold, even when he was scolding/threatening to taze Tony if he ever so much as considered trying to take apart a loaded gun again. He didn't do the pretend respect thing that Obie did where he acted like he was treating Tony like an adult but still sort of acted like everything Tony said was stupid.

He treated Tony like he treated Pepper. Like he treated Natasha and Clint. With fond respect. It was very difficult for someone like Tony to push that away.

Which didn't mean he wasn't going to try.

"This was nothing, Agent Coulson. I could do this in my sleep. Don't know if you could, though. It might be tough for someone your age, you know?" Tony said dryly, looking as nonchalant as one could when they were three years old and bundled in someone's arms.

"No denying that. Natasha's usually kind enough to give me a handicap when I play with her." Phil said, carefully setting the future billionaire down on his feet. "She must think you're as good as Clint is if you didn't get one."

Tony preened for a moment before standing up straighter and crossing his arms. "Yeah, well, I did go easy on them. I didn't want to beat her test too quickly and make Clint look bad."

"I sincerely appreciate that, Mr. Stark."

Tony grinned up at him before bouncing back over to Pepper. While Tony's back was to him, Phil raised an eyebrow at Pepper. She shrugged casually back as she lifted Tony up onto her lap. "They seemed to have fun?" She offered.

Phil resisted the urge to snort.

He turned back to Clint and Natasha. "Did you finish all of your work?" he asked. Both nodded immediately, Clint going over to where their duffle bags were sitting to pull out two workbooks. When Clint

handed them over, Phil took a second to scan them over to make sure that work had actually been done before closing the books. He knelt down and gave them each a more lingering pat on the head. "Good job. And thank you for playing..._nicely_ with Mr. Stark while you were here."

Natasha nodded at him and Clint shot a smile at Tony over his shoulder. Tony, bent forward and resting his head on Pepper's desk, smiled sleepily back.

Pepper bounced Tony lightly by jiggling one knee. "Would you like to see our guests off, Mr. Stark?" she asked.

Tony sat up on Pepper's lap. He gave them a dismissive flick of the wrist, though the effect was ruined by how hard he was trying not to smile. "Good job, team. We are done for the day. You may take your leave." he said, managing to keep his voice level.

Clint and Natasha shot each other a look, half rolling their eyes. As one, they turned back to Tony and gave him a half bow. "Yes, Mr. Stark." They chorused before doing an about face and marching from the room in step with one another.

As they left they left the room, Phil couldn't help but notice out of the corner of his eye that Tony's eyes were really wide and bright as he stared at them, pointing with an excitedly shaking finger as Pepper tried to pick the boy's chin up off the floor.

Letting Pepper babysit them hadn't been so bad, he supposed. Though he did make sure to open a new savings account the next day at his bank. And by savings, he meant 'litigation funds.'

7. Tony

Tony Stark, at four year old, had a level of intelligence many ten times his age could barely even dream of. Tony Stark, at four years old, could take apart and improve computers and low to mid grade weaponry. He had the kind of rudimentary knowledge in calculus and physics that many only learned in high schools or colleges.

Tony Stark, at four years old, was the heir apparent of the largest weapons manufactures in the world.

Being Tony Stark, at any age but especially at four years old, was a dangerous thing.

Phil's eyes darted open at the sound of his phone's soft buzzing. He slipped a hand back under his pillow and silenced it before pulling it out. Pepper's name flashed brightly on the display. He pressed the answer button as he slipped out from under his two kid-shaped cats.

"Pepper?" he asked once he was out of the bed. He was already grabbing a pair of slacks, a dress shirt, and a suit jacket to put on before she even answered. Even if he hadn't heard her voice, Pepper calling him at 2:45 am on a weeknight (or any night) was cause for immediate alarm.

There was a long pause filled with shaky breathing before Pepper

answered. "Howard's dead." she whispered shakily. "They...they're both dead. There was an accident."

Phil froze where he was, arm half into his suit jacket at this point. He blinked hard and took a moment to collect himself. "Where's Tony?" he asked.

"I...he was in the car with them. But...Phil, they can't find him!" she said.

Phil's grip on the phone tightened, his knuckles turning white. "Pepper...where are you?" he asked slowly, pulling his jacket on the rest of the way and grabbing one of his guns from the weapons drawer. That he had one at all spoke volumes to the sort of paranoia he'd grown to live with.

"Already here. Open the door?"

Phil ended the call and shoved his phone into his pocket as he all but dashed to the front door. When he opened the door, Pepper was standing there, face tear stained and eyes bloodshot, her clothes wrinkled and her hair mussed. Phil immediately gathered her into his arms and held her tightly. "I will find him. I will make this okay somehow, I promise." he murmured into her hair.

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According to the preliminary reports Pepper had received, a not entirely sober Howard Stark had been driving his family home from a gala and had made a too sharp turn around a bend and lost control of his car. The vehicle had crashed through the protective dividers and had gone over the cliff. Howard and Maria Stark were believed to have died on impact. Their son, whose blood had been found at the scene, was nowhere to be found. It was assumed that he had survived the crash and had gotten out of the car and wandered away, likely delirious from the accident.

In addition, the family's butler, Jarvis, appeared to have suffered from a heart attack upon hearing the news. He was already dead by the time the paramedics arrived.

Both Clint and Natasha had frowned deeply at Pepper's report. Phil couldn't blame them. As reasonable as the report seemed from the outside, it all seemed too convenient from their standpoint.

Phil closed his eyes and rubbed his eyebrows. "Pepper, you're going to be taking a sabbatical. The loss of your boss has left you distraught and you're going to need a week to process it." he said.

Pepper's eyes narrowed, a bit of her normal fire returning. "_NO_. Phil, I'm _not_ going to-"

"Jarvis was probably poisoned." Clint said seriously, interrupting her. "They might go after you too if they see you looking into it."

Pepper stilled and turned to stare at the nine year old boy. She opened her mouth then closed it before turning to stare at Phil. "Is he right? Is that...could that be true?"

Phil sighed softly. "Not just 'could.' It most likely is true. It's all too...quick to be normal. Especially considering who we're talking about. Assuming foul play before natural causes in a situation like this is usually the best bet." Phil stood up and went into the kitchen, returning minutes later with a new tray of drinks. "I'm going to need you to stay here for a little while. If you need to go anywhere this week, take Clint and/or Natasha with you. They make inconspicuous bodyguards." he said, offering her another cup of tea.

She took the cup from him slowly, staring up at him with something close to alarm or horror. After a moment, she blinked hard and seemed to gather herself back into the ultra competent executive assistant that she was. "Okay. What do I do now?"

"Help them check traffic and security systems. Natasha, call Sitwell and have him give you access to the satellites. I'm going to check out the scenes. Clint, come with." Phil said.

Natasha nodded and pulled out a small cell phone, dialing the number by heart since she refused to save any into the phone. Clint uncurled himself and hopped off the couch and took his place at Phil's side.

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Checking out the scene turned out to be surprisingly easy. They couldn't get near the actual actual crash site but pretending to be a small family that was checking out the commotion (with the two dozen other rubbernecks) got them as close as the dividers. Phil, changed into a T-shirt and slacks, took out a camera and started taking video images of the scene while Clint leaned against the dividers and stared down into the accident, taking in as much as he could.

There was a single set of footprints, barely visible but far too big to be those of a child, leading away from the accident. It stopped at a large tree a couple feet away from the wreckage. There was the glint of something metal in that same tree as well as in several trees further and further from the crash site. As if someone had used wire to rappel from tree to tree.

The path in the trees led out to the road. Which meant that whoever had taken Tony could be long gone.

Phil liked to think himself extraordinarily capable in his work. But three weeks later, they still hadn't found Tony. What he had managed to find, fortunately, was information tying Stark Industries Vice President, Obadiah Stane, to the deaths of the Starks and the disappearance of their son.

They hadn't even needed to pull out torture devices or threaten maximum security prison time (though Phil deeply deeply wanted to). It wasn't even as if Stane had been willing to talk. He wasn't. It was simply that, an hour into Stane's interrogation, minutes before things were about to get...rough, he had received a call from Natasha.

"You might want to get over to the docks on the east side of 70th. Something blew up." she said calmly, as if reporting a late lunch

delivery.

"Many somethings blew up. Like seven somethings." Clint added in the background.

"Seven somethings blew up." she amended.

Phil pulled the phone away from his ear and frowned. That area was where they had managed to narrow their search. Having things blow up in the area was a bad sign.

Phil left Sitwell to deal with Stane and hightailed it over to the docks. As promised seven (well, twelve at this point) different warehouses were up in flames. Firefighters were on the scene trying to contain the damage, though the fire kept spreading. Phil cursed quietly at the sight. Just when he was about to run in, safety be damned, and try to find something, something, left of that smart little boy, he felt something hit his left hip.

He spun around but didn't see anything. When it happened again, hitting his right this time, Phil turned only his head in the direction it had come from. In a set of bushes a tiny hand wiggled out at him.

Phil clutched his chest, nearly dropping to his knees in the relief he felt. The force of weeks upon weeks of constant searching with little sleep was finally starting to really hit him. He made his way over to the bush and knelt down carefully, making sure that there was no one looking. "Are you okay?" he asked softly.

"Um...not really, but yeah." Said the bushes. Phil spread the bush open so that he could look inside. It took all of his energy to not cringe. Tony was sitting curled up there with a small battery attached to his chest by several wires. He was actually covered in wires, though Phil got the feeling that the majority of them had nothing to do with the battery in his chest. That thought caused him to pause.

He glanced at the (still growing, oh my god) fire and back to the boy. "Did you do that?" he asked.

"Will I get in trouble if I say yes?"

"Definitely not."

"...maybe. I mean, yeah, obviously. But it kinda got...out of hand?" Tony said. His voice was softer than normal, raspy even, which was concerning. Phil reached down and bundled the boy into his arms, careful not to jostle the battery.

"I'm going to take you home, okay?" he said quietly as he ushered Tony into his car. When he set Tony down in the back seat, carefully buckling the seat belt, the little boy frowned up at him.

"I don't have a home anymore. They said...you're here, so you know already and now I'm alone, so they're probably-" Phil put a hand under Tony's chin to close his mouth.

"You have Pepper. You have me. You have Clint and Natasha. You're not alone now and you will never be alone again. Okay?" he said,

maintaining eye contact.

Tony blinked hard, pulling back the tears that had been welling up in his eyes. He nodded, solemn.

Finding Tony set off an alarming domino effect. No one had intended for Tony to live so no one had bothered to talk around their plans while he was nearby. Which meant that enough of SI's executive members were either arrested, pulled into questioning or resigned from their positions that Howard's will could actually be upheld without a fight.

Which meant that, in the event that Howard Stark died before his child became of age and his Vice President wasn't around to act as President in the boy's stead, the company was left in the hands of the one that had always been running it anyway.

Pepper Potts.

Trying to make sure that Tony even still had a business to inherit when he was older meant devoting even more of her time to work. Leaving Tony without his primary caretaker.

Which just left Phil.

Well, which left the Child Protective Services System really. But Clint and Natasha had stared at Fury who stared at Phil until he agreed that yes, leaving Tony with literally anyone else would likely end up with more dead bodies and destroyed buildings. Even trying to pull the whole 'lack of room in my apartment' card didn't work.

It just meant that when he came home from work one day, the day before he was meant to pick Tony up from the secure medical facility the FBI had placed him in, he found that the wall separating his apartment from the one next door had been taken out and Mrs. Graham had apparently won a trip to London as a prize to a contest she had never actually entered.

Convenient.

8. Interlude 5

From this chapter on, the lovely QueenOfTheQuill has been acting as my Beta. (Let me tell you, if you don't have a beta, get one! Having her has made my writing a lot more clear. It's much easier to make fewer mistakes when you actually KNOW what mistakes you're making.)

* * *

><p>Tony's seen a lot of fascinating things in his lifetime. Being the son of a genius engineer (and being a fledgling one himself), Tony has had the chance to see mechanical marvels the likes of which few could ever begin to understand.<p>

But he couldn't help but think that the most amazing thing he's seen in his short, short lifetime was his own heart.

Even on the large screen to his left, his heart looked so small. Like

a trembling little animal. But watching it, actually watching it...it was strong. Each heartbeat came in a steady burst that sent the small mass of muscles rippling. On top of that were the surgeons. With steady hands, they attached what seemed to be a magnet to his heart. It was probably supposed to keep all the shrapnel in his chest from killing him, like the car battery. Yinsen had said that his vessels were too tiny to remove them properly.

It was sort of a shame. But watching them work was nice.

He saw movement out of the corner of his eyes. Phil Coulson was sitting in a chair off in the corner, all dressed up like a surgeon (though he wasn't fooling Tony!), eyes focused on the TV too. It took effort to keep from moving his head when he looked over at the man. As if feeling the weight of Tony's stare, Coulson's gaze shifted from Tony's heart to the boy himself.

And blanched.

It was a weird reaction (didn't he want to see Tony?) but he managed to cover it up quickly enough. He was pretty good at that.

Coulson stood up slowly and came to stand at Tony's side. He stared down at Tony who blinked up at him. Coulson's eye twitched though a warm smile was on his face.

"Agent Coulson. We talked about this," one of the surgeons sighed out.

Coulson gave Tony that little upward tick of the lips that he used when he thought other people were being weird (re: stupid) and was amused by it. "You didn't deliver enough anesthesia," he replied.

The surgeon glowered at him and glanced at the anesthesiologist for confirmation. The anesthesiologist scowled beneath the mask. "We gave him enough to put a child of his weight and size out for nine hours. We've had training for this, Agent Coulson," she said smugly.

"S-sir?" One of the staff nurses squeaked out. When the doctors glanced at her, she jerked her head in Tony's direction. The doctors looked as well and cursed in shock when Tony blinked up at them in confusion. Tony glanced at Coulson again in growing alarm. They were panicking so he should be too, right?

Coulson's hand landed gently but firmly on his forehead and just stayed there, his thumb rubbing softly at Tony's temple. After a moment, he moved his hand a little further up Tony's forehead. "Can you feel anything? Are you in any pain? Blink once for no, twice for yes." Tony gave him one hard blink. Coulson smiled for him again, a little wider this time. "They're going to put you back to sleep. It's safer if you're not awake to panic. We'll be here when you wake up, I promise. And...the surgery's being recorded," he said, adding the last bit in at the sight of Tony's pout.

Tony blinked twice at him in confirmation, eyes already heavy as more of the drug leaked into his system.

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Tony died in his sleep.

It was the only explanation for what he saw when he next opened his eyes. He was in a dark place, the only light being what looked like thousands of stars in the distance. Blue and white and yellow and red lights glimmered before him.

It was captivating.

His body felt light, if not weightless, like he was underwater or on a cloud. There was no pain, which he was grateful for, just a sense of not really being a body. Though his right arm felt as if it were being weighed down, as if by an anchor that was keeping him from being sent adrift. He stared at the universe before him for a long moment before his eyes fell closed again. He wasn't even sure whether or not he wanted to cry because everyone else was back...home. Everyone was home and he wasn't there anymore...

He was startled at the vague sensation of something shifting beside him. He turned his head to the left and was more than a little surprised to see Clint watching him. The older boy was sitting on a chair pulled up close to the bed, arms propped up on it. Clint gave Tony a relieved smile and put a finger to his lips in a 'shush' motion before he reached out, running his fingers through Tony's dark locks.

"Welcome back," he whispered.

Tony just stared at him with wide eyes before glancing up at the endless space ahead of them and back to Clint in confusion.

Even in the relative darkness, Tony could spot the telltale duck of the head that meant that Clint was trying to hide a blush. "Uh, Nat and I put them up. I figured it'd get really dark and scary here at night and...I thought it'd cheer you up?" he said, eyes darting back up to Tony's with a bit of uncertainty.

Tony stared at Clint, breathless for a moment. Then he beamed, relaxing into the pillow. He leaned his head into Clint's hand, letting Clint pet him to his heart's content. Clint paused in his motions and climbed up on the bed, managing to do so without breaking contact between them. He moved to sit next to Tony's head, letting the younger boy rest his head against Clint's hip as he continued petting.

Tony felt that weight on his right arm lessen briefly. He felt thin fingers, larger than his own but not as big as Pepper's, wrap around his arm as the brush of something thin and silky ran across it before the weight resettled. Tony blinked slowly and tilted his head as far back as he could without turning over. All he could see was a mass of red curls that completely blocked his view of his arm. Tony couldn't even begin to hide the smile that bubbled up as he turned back and buried his face in Clint's side.

He was home...and what a wonderful thing that was.

Once again, many thanks (so many thanks!) to QueenOfTheQuill for being my beta. May I give her tons of more work to do!

Also, Ð¿Ñ,Ð,Ñ†Ð°Ð° (or ptichka) is "little bird."

* * *

><p>For as long as Phil has had both Natasha and Clint, the two of them have been nearly inseparable.<p>

Clint is relaxed around Natasha, playful in a way that he rarely is with anyone else. She is, quite obviously, the coolest thing since sliced bread (or Phil) in the boy's opinion. He defers to her opinions and desires happily and goes out of his way to remain within her range of vision or hearing if there is nothing keeping him from doing so. If she needs him, he will always be there, without question and with little to no complaint.

Natasha is relaxed around Clint, playful in a way that she rarely is with anyone else. She touches him when she can simply because she can. She runs her fingers through his hair, around his neck or down his spine at every opportunity. More than anything else, she is fond of him. He is her little brother, her best friend, her Ð¿Ñ,Ð,Ñ†Ð°Ð°. He is hers and, although he doesn't ask unnecessary things of her (she is older and of more experience, after all), she is very much his as well.

Now that they were a little older, Phil felt more comfortable requisitioning a small set of attached and soundproofed rooms two floors down from his office for them to use instead of keeping them in his increasingly cramped office all day. They were able to come and go as they pleased so long as no one was harmed or terrorized along the way.

Once Tony was released from the hospital and added to their little group, one of the 3 conjoined rooms was outfitted with any and all of the medical equipment that the little boy could ever need in case of an emergency. Tony was kept with Phil for large chunks of the day (he's seen what they're like all together, no thank you) and then sent to play with Clint and Natasha after he'd slept and eaten. Then they all go home and prepare to start the cycle again the next day.

For as long as Phil has had both Natasha and Clint, the two of them have been nearly inseparable.

It never occurred to Phil that this could be a bad thing.

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Phil had a love/hate relationship with paperwork. She loved him, of course. Phil always knew the exact form that needed to be filled out for any specific occasion. He knew which were meant to be done in singular and which were required to be done in triplicate. He could fill out any form on a typewriter, on a computer or by hand and always have it come out neat and professional. Paperwork loved Phil and, while he liked her well enough, he couldn't help but feel like she had gotten a bit clingy as of late.

So he was all too happy for the distraction when he saw the intercom

attached to his desk flicker. It was the third button down, the one attached to the medical ward of the kids' room. Phil was on it in a flash. He picked up the phone attached to the monitor. "What's happened?" he asked immediately.

"Clint and Natasha are fighting," It was Tony, his voiced lowered into a panicky whisper. "They were arguing about stuff and they were yelling and then they starting shoving and hitting and, and...they're not stopping and they won't listen and it's really, really _"

"Tony," Phil interrupted as softly as he could manage. He stood up and left the room, power walking over to the stairs. "Where are you right now?" he asked as he entered the stairwell.

"In the hospital room. Um, under the...I'm in a cabinet. The one under the sink?"

"Okay, just stay there, alright? I'll be there in 40 seconds. Start counting for me," he ordered.

Tony immediately started counting, using "Mississippi's" to stretch the seconds out properly. By the time he had reached twelve Mississippi's, Tony's voice had already calmed significantly.

To be honest, Phil wasn't all that worried. Clint and Natasha liked to bicker over stupid things sometimes. Neither of them were all that prone to acts of aggression...aside from the sort of things that they had been ordered to do, anyway. He just assumed that Tony, having been raised in a corporate environment, wouldn't be used to seeing people argue loudly or obviously.

He was very wrong.

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When he opened the door, he was immediately hit with the sound of enraged screaming. Phil shut the door behind him quickly, dropping the phone as he rushed towards the noise. It came from the next room over.

Clint and Natasha were rolling around on the floor, both covered in scratches and bruises. Clint was underneath Natasha, teeth tearing into the skin of the forearm that was pressed against his face. She jerked her arm up and down in response, using it to slam the back of his head hard against the ground in order to shake him off. Her other hand was pressed against Clint's stomach, her knuckles ground into the space just under his ribcage. Clint's other hand was around Natasha's neck, nails digging into either side of her throat. They were still screaming at each other in a language that he didn't quite know but assumed to be Russian. Clint forced himself into a sitting position and used his newfound leverage to release Natasha's arm and headbutt her hard, earning a low venomous sound that filled Phil with a level of dread he hadn't felt in a while.

All in all, Phil was sure he'd seen less aggressive bar fights between gangsters.

Phil immediately rushed in. He grabbed each child by the hair and yanked their heads away from each other sharply. "That. Is. Enough,"

he barked.

Both immediately quieted, staring up at him with wide eyes.

"What is going on?" Phil asked, managing -barely - to stay on just this side of a growl.

They glanced at each and then back at Phil, lips parting but no words actually coming out. Whatever anger, or even irritation, towards each other that had been there before had been forgotten at that surprising show of aggression from Phil. Neither of them were even frightened (thankfully), looking bewildered and vaguely alarmed at most.

Phil blinked slow and hard and then released them. He raised his hands and rubbed the heels of his palms against his eyelids as he took a couple deep breaths.

"Phil-" Clint started. Phil removed a hand from his eyes to raise a single finger at the boy, silencing him.

Phil allowed a full minute to compose himself before lowering his hands and speaking. "Clint. Go to my office and use the first aid kit to take care of yourself. Do not go anywhere else. Do not speak to anyone else. I will be back for you in a hour. Are we clear?"

Clint's eyes grew wider and for a moment it looked as if he intended to say something before he nodded and left the room. Phil straightened from the crouch he'd been in and pointed at Natasha and then to the second row of the bookshelf where another first aid kit was located. She nodded slowly in response and moved to take care of herself.

Phil went over to the medical room and immediately saw the half open cabinet under the sink. It opened up wider as Tony poked his head out. He stared up at Phil with wide confused eyes. Phil made his way over to Tony and scooped him up into his arms. "Sorry, I have to deal with these two. Do you want mind if I leave you with Agent Sitwell for a bit?"

Tony frowned at that, a little crinkle forming in his brow. He shook his head and Phil gave him a weak smile in return. He left the room with Tony in arm and used his free hand to prevent the boy from trying to peek over his shoulder at Natasha. Phil dropped Tony off with Jasper who just startled and stared up at Phil with a look of horror that had an actual smile forming on Tony's face. Phil resisted the urge to look back, though he made a mental note to buy something nice for the man later.

By the time he returned to the kids' room, Natasha had managed to disinfect most of her wounds and was in the process of wrapping her arm. "Natasha," he called. When she looked up, Phil tilted his head toward the door. "We're going," he said and then added, "bring it with you," when she glanced at the in-use first aid kit.

Natasha nodded, face solemn, and gathered her supplies. Ten minutes found them in Phil's car, Natasha treating the last of her many cuts as Phil drove. He eventually parked in the parking lot of a three story recreational facility about a ten minute walk from the FBI

office building. They exited the car and entered the building together, Phil stopping briefly to show his card to the attendant. He led her to a back seating area that held several benches and motioned for her to sit and stay. He returned not two minutes later with a large packet of pamphlets and a chart. He pulled a small side table over in front of them and set the papers down on it. He took a seat next to her and placed a hand on her head.

"I don't know...what on earth that was. I don't even want to know right now, alright. I just know that you both should have a way of dealing with your anger that doesn't involve hurting each other. And that you need...some time apart. So...pick a hobby. Any hobby. If you end up not liking it we can change it later, but you have to be doing something."

Natasha turned her head to stare up at her caretaker for a moment before she took the chart with the hobbies listed in full. She perused the chart, pausing every now and again to pick up one of the pamphlets and look over that as well. After a time, she handed one of the pamphlets to Phil, her head turned forward and posture straight as if expecting a bad reaction from it.

Phil glanced down at the pamphlet. It was for gymnastics and had several young girls in bright colored leotards on the front. He couldn't help the smile that blossomed on his face. "Looks fun," he said.

Natasha's head jerked up and she turned carefully to look at Phil appraisingly. "You think so?" she asked slowly.

Phil ran his fingers through her hair and was pleased when she leaned back into it a touch. "Yeah, I took gymnastics in high school," he said and immediately regretted having done so at the way her eyes lit up. "Shut up," he added preemptively. Natasha just smiled at him, her eyebrows raised high. Phil sighed, "If you have to tell Clint, don't tell Tony," he said in surrender.

Natasha nodded and leaned closer to him, tapping his shoulder with her head.

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When they returned to his office, Phil was a bit pained to find Clint under his desk, his chin propped up on arms that were folded on top of the rolling chair. Phil pulled the chair out slowly to allow Clint time to get up without falling. Clint stood up and glanced at Phil but was stopped by a hand on the chin when he tried to look over his shoulder at Natasha.

"Clint, you're with me. Natasha, hour of silence," he ordered as he ushered Clint out of the room.

Clint spent the ride to the recreational facility sitting with perfect posture, his gaze focused on the dashboard rather than on the passing sights as usual. Once he'd parked, Phil unbuckled his seat-belt and turned to face Clint. It was a moment before Clint finally turned to face Phil, eyes only meeting Phil's for a half second before flicking down to Phil's tie.

Phil sighed softly. Clint was often such an easy kid for people (re:

Phil) to get along with that Phil sometimes forgot that Clint didn't really handle stress well. He was even quicker to shut himself down than Natasha was. Phil cupped Clint's face in both hands and leaned down to let his forehead rest against Clint's. He waited in silence until the boy had no real choice but to look Phil in the eye.

"We're okay," he said.

Clint blinked slowly, "We're okay?"

"We're okay," Phil assured.

Clint rolled his lips and licked them before nodding. Phil offered him a smile and was pleased to get one, albeit shy, in return.

They got out the car together and Phil repeated the process he'd just been through with Natasha, to the clear confusion of the attendant.

Clint glanced over the long list of activities and frowned. "What did Nat choose?"

"Not important. Choose what you want to do."

Clint made his way through the pamphlets slowly. He paused for a long time on one in particular though. Phil leaned over and glanced at the pamphlet Clint was holding. It was for children's archery.

"You like that one?" Phil asked casually.

Clint started as if he had forgotten Phil was even there. The paper crumpled a little as he squeezed his hands together. "Yeah, I mean, no. Um...I don't have a bow anymore and there's a lot of fees and stuff to buy and -"

"The suit I'm wearing cost \$1,249," Phil interrupted.

Clint stopped and turned to stare at him as if he'd said he had actually skinned 101 puppies in order to make it. Phil resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

"This is one suit, Clint. And it's not even my best one. I love the feel of a good suit. It makes working long hours easier. So I make the money that I do so that I can enjoy things like that after I've paid all my bills. So, Clint, do you want to take up archery again?"

Clint swallowed and then nodded shyly.

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He let Clint and Natasha be together again once they got back, the two all too happy to fill Phil's office with the sounds of chatter about their new found hobbies. Phil was all too happy to tune them out and get back to work, suddenly missing paperwork (easy, easy paperwork) with a passion.

"You took gymnastics?" Clint suddenly cried out.

Phil twitched and stomped down on the cringe that was threatening to pop up. "You're both grounded," he said instead.

"BOOO!" The group chorused. Phil looked up, surprised to have heard Tony and Jasper's voice along with Clint and Natasha's. Jasper stood in the open doorway, his suit ruffled from Tony wrangling. Tony was leaning down in Jasper's arms towards Clint and Natasha and seemed to be questioning the reason for the surprise grounding, even though he'd been quick to go along with disparaging it.

Jasper set the tiny billionaire down, raised his hands in a placating manner, and then actually made a run for it. Phil glared at the door and then down at his children, cringing at the way Tony's face suddenly lit up with glee.

"I didn't tell him!" Natasha said when she caught the look on his face.

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What dumbass thought it would be a good idea for Phil to take these monsters in?

Oh, wait.

10. Bruce

So this one was a long time coming. I hadn't intended for it to be nearly this long (I wasn't going to include the scenes of how they met and found their way home initially but then I started writing...

Anyway, many thanks to the lovely QueenOfTheQuill. For anyone out there wondering whether or not to get a beta, definitely do. I write a LOT better now that I can actually see my own mistakes.

**Summary: **In which Tony meets Bruce and Bruce meets everyone else.

* * *

><p>It wasn't that Tony...disliked living with Coulson and Clint and Natasha and Pepper. It's just that sometimes...he felt unneeded. Although he was still technically the heir of Stark Industries, Pepper didn't really need him for press conferences or publicity meets. She spent her days in meeting after meeting, wringing respect out of the old male board members and forcing their stocks up through intelligence and the sheer force of her sharply smiling will.<p>

The fact that she had moved in with Phil at some point before Tony was released from the hospital had helped. It was an ease of access thing, mostly. She could see them all more often and she had a safe place to sleep. It also meant that if Tony stayed awake long enough, he could greet Pepper when she got home and show her all that he'd done during the day. Which, in itself, was not all that hard. Phil often mentioned that Tony was merely one unsupervised weekend or chemical experiment away from being fully nocturnal.

But, more and more often recently, Pepper began coming home later and leaving home earlier. There were incidents and catastrophes and strikes to be dealt with. She was always on the move. And, even if Tony hooked up a small warning system to alert him when the door was opened, even if he snuck out of bed to go spend time with her, Pepper was so undeniably tired. He could see it in her face, in the slight slump of her shoulders, in the way two strands of her hair had come to fall loose elegantly at the side of her face from her firmly packed bun.

She was like the prettiest worker bee ever with way too many flowers to pollinate.

And, even though she smiled and held him in her lap and asked about his day, Tony found himself increasingly unable to bring himself to keep her awake any longer than she had been. So he urged her to eat the leftover dinner that had been set aside and then urged her to bed. He curled up next to her and pretended to sleep until Pepper truly had. Then he'd lie awake and watch her for however long it took to still the shaky heavy feeling in his stomach.

When he's older, he'll realize that it's just guilt and he'll realize that he has nothing to feel guilty for, butâ€|for now, he ignores it as side effect of the battery keeping him alive.

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While Coulson did his best to make time for them, as a group or individually, he was busy too. Despite spending the majority of his days with the man, they rarely spoke outside of set times. Coulson had meetings he couldn't bring Tony to. He had paperwork that he needed to get done. Andâ€|he wasn't Pepper. He didn't play. Not really. Tony doubted that the man even really knew how. Because fetch was not considered playing and Tony was too old for board games no matter what the boxes said.

There was also the fact that he wasn't Coulson's. Not really. It was Coulson and Clint and Natasha. One and two and three. They moved together easily, unconsciously and casually. They seemed to know each other as well as they knew themselves and could anticipate the wants and actions of their family members with ease.

Tony was the number four. They ran together but, at least to his ears, it just didn't sound as good.

He supposed it didn't help that Coulson had decided that Clint and Natasha needed to start going to school. There was reasoning to it, he was sure. There always was with Coulson. But that reasoning still left Tony mostly alone. Coulson could trust Tony to manage himself well enough in his little suite of rooms, he was just as smart as Clint and Natasha after all. Coulson came to check up on him often and even kept Tony at his side on the increasingly fewer days when his schedule wasn't filled with meeting and conferences butâ€|

How badly did any of them really need him?

Coulson was an adult. His worry probably came from the fact that Tony was friends with his kids and that worry that some adults had for all children. Pepperâ€|Pepper was busy. Pepper was so, SO busy. She would probably welcome some quiet time where she could just immediately go

to sleep when she got home. Clint and Natasha had each other, of course. And, although they didn't talk about them, the two were probably making all KINDS of friends at their new school. They probably wouldn't miss him for that long.

It would be fine.

With that thought, Tony left his carefully worded letter on the low table of the living room. It was a short thing, just a simple "Dear everyone. I'm going to live on my own from now on. I might come back to visit one day. I'll be okay and I'm sure you guys will be okay so don't worry about me. Bye, Tony."

That done, it wasn't hard for him at all to disable Coulson's security system and slip out unannounced into the night with a small backpack full of clothes and his own stash from the emergency money Coulson had set aside for each of them.

Living on his own was much more difficult than Tony had expected, the biggest problem being that people didn't rent motel rooms to little kids even if they were good for it. The burly looking guy at the desk had simply threatened to call the police on Tony if he didn't leave. Which wasn't even fair since he hadn't done anything wrong yet.

Tony immediately decided that food was more important than shelter anyway. Getting food wasn't all that hard at his age, though he realized quickly that it was better to lie about who he was and why he was alone when the waitress of the first diner he'd been in got that weird little smile on her face. Obie got that same little sharp smile on his face whenever Tony managed to build something new that his dad could use. He left while she was getting his food.

By day three of his self-induced exile, Tony had managed to make a little system for himself. He stayed outside during the night, drifting between parks and the occasional car junk yard if he could sneak in, never staying in one place for more than an hour and fanning out further and further each time. Then in the morning, once he was tired, he made his way to the nearest library by bus. If he got there while it was open, he would sneak up into a high shelf or one of the vents in the bathrooms to sleep, only getting down long enough to plug himself in for an hour's charge. If it wasn't open when he got there, he'd find a large dumpster to slide in behind to sleep.

His system worked well for about two weeks. Though Tony didn't eat often, he did still eat, so eventually his emergency fund ran low. He made do by watching people like a hawk when he was out. He initially considered picking pockets as Clint had taught him, but didn't quite trust his skills enough to try. Instead, he would try to find people stuck on the side of the road and offer to help them with their car problems (his dad was a mechanic, of course!). The happy drivers were usually all too happy to offer him some cash for being so helpful. And, of course, he 'lived nearby' so there was certainly no need to try to drive him home.

One day, about 16 days after he'd run away, Tony found himself in an alley way around 4:30 am, planning to get some much needed sleep. He made his way to the very back of the alleyway, to the dumpster he'd slept behind just the night before. But, once he made his way to the back of it, he found there was already someone there.

There was a little boy there. Well, not so little, he was definitely older than Tony. Maybe older than Clint too, but he was curled up so tightly that it was difficult for Tony to tell. He had brown hair that looked greasy and dirty but like it would be really fluffy when clean the way Natasha's got when she didn't blow dry it properly.

The boy opened his eyes and frowned up at Tony, bristling like a cat that wasn't sure whether or not to be irritated. The rational side of Tony, which sounded suspiciously like Coulson, told him that he should probably be wary. That he should maybe find another alley to hang out in. But Tony was tired and too lazy to actively consider that as an option. So Tony made a wavy motion at him, to move down. The boy's brow knitted in confusion.

"Move over. Wanna sleep," Tony finally said.

The boy startled and immediately made room for Tony before stilling like he couldn't believe he'd just done that. But Tony was already sliding in, pulling his backpack against his chest and wiggling until he found a comfortable position. The boy was still staring at Tony once he had.

"You shouldn't â€"

"Morning. Sleep now," he interrupted.

The mousy haired boy just sighed and stilled, returning to his rest.

When Tony woke several hours later, mousy boy was still there, watching him in concern. Tony stared back for a moment before he smiled. "Uh. Hi. I'm Tony," he offered.

Mousy boy bit his lip and then smiled shyly. "I'm Bruce."

Tony nodded. "Nice to meet you. I'd shake your hand but there's not enough room."

Bruce shook his head. "No, that'sâ€|that's fine. Are youâ€|okay? Why are you sleeping behind dumpsters?"

Tony rolled his eyes then narrowed them slightly. "Because it's fun? And other reasons. Why are you sleeping behind a dumpster?" he asked dryly.

Bruce shifted a little away, no longer meeting Tony's eyes. "Reasons. Um, probably not the same ones as you."

Tony nodded and they sat in silence for several minutes. Mostly because Tony wasn't quite ready to get up yet and Bruce couldn't bring himself to urge the kid to move.

That is, until Bruce's stomach growled. Loudly.

Tony startled and looked over at Bruce. "Wow. When was the last time you ate?"

Bruce ducked his head sheepishly. "Umâ€|maybe two days

ago?"

"_Maybe_ two days ago?!" Tony reached into his bag, pulled out two bags of dried blueberries and all but threw them at Bruce. "Eat those. Then we're going to walk over to the burger place on 14th that opens inâ€|half an hour and I'm going to get you real food," he said with more authority than it was reasonable for a five year old to have.

"No, I'm fine. I can't take food fromâ€|" Bruce started, but Tony raised a hand and pointed sharply at him.

"Uh uh. You don't get to argue until after you've eaten a full meal."

"Butâ€|it'll be too late by thenâ€|"

"You say that like it's my problem."

Bruce snorted, his shoulders shaking with barely contained laughter. He nodded shakily, still a little too breathless to speak, and dug into the bag of berries.

Bruce didn't know if it was the brand of berries or just because they came from this weird little kid, but he'd never tasted anything so good.

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They ran together for just over a week. During that time, Tony learned that Bruce was smart. He kept up with Tony when he rambled about the machines he'd fixed or the battery in his chest. Tony learned that Bruce was strong, able to change a tire or lift an engine out of a pickup truck without help. Tony learned that Bruce was kind, in the way that Natasha could be kind when he was sick, urging for Tony's care and welfare before his own. He always made sure they'd have enough for Tony to eat before he ordered for himself. Tony learned that Bruce was an amazing person, like Pepper levels of amazing. Tony learned that Bruce was thirteen years old and that he was recently orphaned and had run away from the people that had taken him in.

It was a week into their newfound friendship that Tony found out why.

They were in a park bathroom around 3:00 in the morning. Bruce had already finished washing up and was cleaning yesterday's clothes in one of the sinks while Tony carefully ran a cloth around the large battery installed in his chest. Tony had just managed to finish this task when the door suddenly burst open without warning.

What happened next could only be described as a clusterfuck.

A bunch of guys in military uniforms stormed in brandishing large guns (pretty guns that Tony was not allowed to touch or take apart, unfortunately) and shouting at them to surrender the weapon that they supposedly had. Which would have been fine if not for the bone shaking roar that was released behind him. Tony turned around just in time to see Bruce's skin ripple and stretch and discolor as he grew larger and larger.

And wasn't that just _awesome_?

The following rampage wasn't quite as awesome, as Bruce seemed unable to listen or understand anything, though all the shooting and shouting wasn't helping, Tony was sure. Men were being thrown left and right, crushed or beaten down under the hands of a six foot tall Bruce. While he didn't fully understand what was going on, Tony was kind enough to grab any guns that fell and shove them behind toilets or under the sinks and hitting anyone that got close with a spare, making it harder for the soldiers to hurt (or attempt to hurt because a fair fight this certainly wasn't) Bruce. He also made sure to empty his own backpack of the weapons he'd managed to make on their journey.

Unfortunately, one of the jerks managed to stab Bruce in the leg with a syringe. Slowly, slowly, Big Bruce started to shrink, clearly tiring and weakening.

Which Tony just couldn't allow.

Tony climbed up onto a toilet seat and pulled a remote out from under his pocket. He glanced out at the men that were slowly getting up, surrounding Bruce. The men weren't paying much attention to him, choosing to go for the (former) obvious threat. A big mistake. Though he wished he could've gotten Bruce out of range, he was fairly sure at this point that the boy would survive it. Tony took a deep breath and pressed the button. There was a sudden discharge of electricity, electrocuting everyone within the eight foot radius Tony had set up just outside the stalls. All of the men went down like puppets with their strings cut.

Tony waited a moment to make sure that the ground wasn't still charged before he climbed down. He stepped around the barely alive (and a couple dead) bodies towards Bruce. He took a moment to check the boy's pulse and, finding one, let out a soft sigh of relief. Tony grabbed Bruce by the arms and dragged him out of the bathroom.

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It took an irritating amount of time to drag Bruce somewhere safe. Safe being the underside of a dumpster at the back of the park that Tony had settled for when he realized that the whole battery in the chest thing would make it near impossible to go much further than that. He was just glad that they were both small enough to fit.

It was several hours before Bruce woke up. By that time, more soldiers had swept the park and left, wisely assuming that the two of them would have gotten the heck out of dodge as soon as possible.

Bruce opened his eyes slowly and lifted his head, only for it to slam against the bottom of the dumpster. He whined softly in irritation, letting his head fall back down into the gravel with a sleepy grumble.

"Hey," Tony whispered. Bruce started to lift his head again but caught himself and turned it instead. He blinked at Tony slowly before recognition dawned and his eyes went very wide. Bruce gasped

sharply.

"Are you okay? Did they hurt you? Did I-"

"Yes, no and no. Awesome, by the way. How do you do that 'roar, roar smash' thing?"

Bruce's eyebrows knitted in confusion and he stared at Tony as if he'd been concussed. Or replaced by aliens. "â€|Awesome?" he asked, clearly choosing to just ignore the question.

"Yeah. Obviously. You saved us."

"I put you in danger. They were after me."

Tony frowned at him. "Why?"

Bruce's eyes shifted away, though he didn't turn away. "My dadâ€|injected me with this thing he was experimenting with. Itâ€|made me turn like that sometimes. When I'm angry. Those guysâ€|are from the army. They want to lock me away and â€|test meâ€|"

"Test you or experiment on you?" Tony asked. At Bruce's startled expression, Tony continued, "My dad made weapons for the government. Hisâ€|partner used to talk about wanting to make people like you. Like that kid from before."

Bruce sighed softly and nodded. He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against the ground. "Youâ€|you're going to have to go," Bruce said quietly. "They're not going to stop coming after me. Andâ€|they'll go through you to do it." He opened his eyes and faced Tony again, his expression solemn. "You'll never be safe."

"I'm Tony Stark. I've never been safe," Tony replied just as serious. Bruce startled at that admission, not just the second statement but the first as well. He'd heard of course about the death, murder, of Howard and Maria Stark butâ€|seeing their child right in front of him, knowing now what Tony was likeâ€|it was a little alarming.

"How did we get out?" he asked instead.

"Short radius electrostatic burst."

"You electrocuted them?"

"â€|Yes? But, in my defense, I thought they were going to kill you."

Bruce groaned softly, pulling his hands up to rub them over his face. He looked a couple seconds and one larger space away from pulling at his hair. "Dammit, Tony. You should have run. If they find you again, they're gonnaâ€|Your fame won't keep them from harming you if they get you alone."

Tony frowned at that. He wanted to say that he'd be fine, he had just saved them after all. He wanted to say that he could protect Bruce, could find them a way to be shielded from these army guys. He wanted to say that nothing could hurt them, he promised! But he didn't. Tony wasn't dumb, even if he could be a little oblivious sometimes. He

knew that he wasn't actually strong enough for that. He knew that he and Bruce, alone, couldn't protect themselves forever.

But Tony wasn't alone. At least, he didn't have to be.

Tony took a slow deep breath. "Okay. I know somewhere we can go. It'll be safe there."

Bruce glanced over at him and sighed softly, suddenly looking old despite his age.

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Tony couldn't help the small frown that appeared on his face as he unlocked the door. He really needed to update Coulson's security alarms. It shouldn't be this easy to break in and out of an FBI agent's house. He carefully climbed down off Bruce's back and helped him up. As they entered the house, Bruce looked around warily, as if waiting for motion sensors on the ground to be tripped and set off alarms.

Motion sensors on the ground. _Yes_. Note to self.

Tony took Bruce by the hand and made his way to the living room. It was still dark out, definitely in the middle of the night, so they intended to just chill for a couple hours until everyone woke up. That worked for all of three minutes.

The room was suddenly flooded with light and both boys cringed, spinning around in their seats. Bruce instinctively pulled Tony down a little and closer to him to make him a smaller target.

Phil Coulson blinked in surprise in the doorway, gun already lowering from where it had been aimed and just stared at the two boys. "Tony?" he asked. His voice was quieter than normal, scratchy in a way that Tony had never heard sleep cause. Coulson set the gun down on the nearest counter and made his way around the couch to face them. He knelt down in front of Tony and stared at him. His eyes were wide and his face actuallyâ€|really expressive. He looked awed, confused, worried and alarmed and it was weird that Tony could even see all of that on his face.

Tony offered the man an uncertain smile and Coulson just frowned, reaching a hand up to gingerly cup Tony's cheek, as if to make sure he was actually there. Once he did, he immediately wrapped his arms around Tony, shaking slightly as he hugged him. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. Whatever we did, whatever I did, I'm sorry, Tony."

Tony frowned in confusion and pulled away. "What? You didn't do anything! I just thoughtâ€|I thought you guys didn'tâ€|need me. I figured that you guys would be okay without me," he said with a slight shrug.

Coulson stared at him as if he were talking about mechanics, like he couldn't even begin to understand the logic behind what Tony had said.

Tony had always enjoyed making Coulson make that expression and, he had to admit, right now seeing it made him unreasonably happy.

"Tony?!"

Tony looked over his shoulder to see Clint in the doorway, wide eyed. The older boy's mouth was open and his chest was heaving but he didn't actually look like he was breathing. "Nat? Nat!" he called without breaking eye contact, as if Tony would disappear again if he did.

Natasha entered the entryway with bleary eyes. She paused at Clint to ask what the commotion was about before she noticed Tony, now standing before Coulson. Her eyes went just as wide as Clint's and she made a beeline for the couch. She actually sprinted at them, which was just as alarming as it sounded. She jerked to a halt right in front of them and took Tony's face into her hands. She looked him up and down for a long moment, taking in every cut and every bruise as few they were. Then her eyes narrowed and she boxed his ears.

Tony let out a soft high pitched whine that was quickly muffled when Natasha clutched him to her chest. "Stupid, stupid ð°ð¾Ñ, ðµð½ð¾ð°," she muttered, burying her face in his hair. "Why would you worry us like that? Why would you leave?" she said, her voice quieting until it was almost a whisper.

Tony tilted his up until he could meet her eyes. "I'm sorry," he offered. He gave her a small pat on the back awkwardly, still nowhere near used to this level of physical affection from her.

She let out a soft sigh. "Crazy, little thing," she scolded, earning a shy smile from Tony. She released him and took a step back. She spared Bruce a single glance before turning towards the other half of their house. "I'll go get Pepper," she said.

Tony gasped and immediately shot a hand out to catch Natasha by the arm. "No! It's still really early! She probably stayed up late from work so she needs to rest!"

Natasha stared at him for a moment before she glanced at Clint and back to him. "â€|No," she said. Clint took off immediately. He only made it as far as the entryway of the second side of their house before he nearly ran into Pepper herself. She was dressed in pajamas like the others, her hair out in a fluffy mess around her head.

The CEO gave him a confused frown. "You're not being quiet at all. What's goingâ€|" she trailed off when she glanced up and saw Tony. Pepper let out a pained, shaky breath and fell to her knees. She extended her hands halfway at him and made grabbing motions, her lips mouthing his name. Tony began walking over to her slowly but at the last moment broke into a run, flying into her arms. Pepper held him tight, without a single tremor. Her body slowly curled up around his as she buried her face into his neck.

When she finally spoke, her voice was a bit rough from choked back sobs, but mostly professional. "Welcome back, Mr. Stark," she said, pulling away enough to press her forehead against his.

Tony took a couple of deep breaths, tiny fists rubbing away at tears that he hadn't realized had fallen. "It's nice to be back, Ms. Potts," he replied, just as casually professional.

Pepper uncurled herself slowly and stood up, keeping Tony firmly in her arms. She walked over to the rest of their little group and stopped before Bruce. "You looked after him?"

Bruce ran a hand through his unruly hair and tugged lightly at the ends. "Yes, well, we sort of took care of each other," he said.

Coulson placed a hand on the floor near Bruce, not quite touching him just in case. "Thank you for that. You have no idea how grateful we are to have him back. Weâ€|never got your name?"

"Uh, Bruce. Bruce Banner."

Coulson nodded and this time extended his hand for Bruce to shake. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Bruce. If there is anything that we can offer or do for you, you're welcome to it."

Bruce startled at that and shook his head hard. "No, I'm notâ€| I don't need anything! I was justâ€|Tony's really niceâ€|" he managed.

Coulson chuckled wryly. "He grows on you against your will," he said in sympathy.

Bruce bit back a smile because that pretty much summed it up and Tony snorted. "Rude." Coulson made a show of openly rolling his eyes in return.

"Coulson! Can...um, can Bruce stay with us? He's an orphan too!" Tony said suddenly, having finally remembered the reason that they came in the first place.

Coulson shrugged, "Sure, why not?"

Even Clint and Natasha looked surprised by the man's immediate surrender to the idea. Bruce frowned in confusion. "Youâ€|can't be serious."

"Why? Are you not an orphan?"

"I, yes, butâ€|"

"But?"

"You don't even know me!" Bruce said, a little exasperated at how easy these people were being about this.

"You brought Tony home. And he likes you. For whatever reason, he's gotten attached to you and I want to say that you kind of need to take responsibility for that."

Bruce balked and just stared at the man before him. "_What_", he said flatly. He turned to Tony and gave him a wide eyed look. Tony bit back a smile, rolled his eyes and shrugged.

Before Bruce could give Coulson an answer (even though he wasn't entirely sure he was being given a choice to begin with), the front door slammed open and several soldiers marched in. Although their

weapons were out, they didn't start shouting or shooting.

Bruce breathed in sharply. The rest of the group immediately took defensive positions. Pepper moving carefully to the rear with Tony in her arms while Phil moved to front, Clint and Natasha right behind him in front of Bruce, to the boy's surprise.

The leader of the group stepped forward, a sharp smile on his mustached face. "Agent Coulson, it's a pleasure," he said, not bothering to offer a hand.

Coulson kept a bland smile on his face. "I'm not sure I can say the same yet, Mr.â€|?"

"_General_ Ross."

"General Ross. May I ask what you are doing in my home so early in the morning?"

"I'm here for Mr. Banner, there. We tracked him to your residence and now we going to need to take him into custody."

"May I ask why?"

"He killed several of my men."

"Only because you started SHOOTING at us!" Tony barked, squirming in Pepper's arms.

Coulson's expression cooled by several degrees. "You shot at _children_?"

Ross' eye twitched and he crossed his arms as he scowled. "Agent Coulson, I don't think you understand just how dangerous that so-called child is. We need toâ€"

"I am well aware of how dangerous this child is." Coulson interrupted pointedly.

Ross startled at that, the surprise showing on his face before he could stomp it down. "Then you understand whyâ€"

Coulson raised a hand to interrupt the man again. "No. _No_. What I don't understand is what made you think that it would be alright to enter a Special Agent's home without a warrant and attempt to remove one of our assets."

Ross narrowed his eyes at Coulson, confusion and suspicion both growing. "You can't be serious."

"Of course. We were made aware of Mr. Banner'sâ€|situation some time ago. When our young Mr. Stark was kidnapped some weeks ago and we were unable to find him, we thought him apt for the job of retrieving and returning him to us," he said with confident ease.

The general's eyebrows grew knitted as suspicion gave way to confusion. "I was not aware that Mr. Stark was kidnapped again," he said slowly.

"We didn't want to risk every Tom, Dick and Jerry out there trying to

find him before we could, after all."

"Right. Fine. Well, you have him back now, so I need toâ€"

"No. See, Mr. Banner has done such a good job in managing Tony that we thought it necessary to keep him on for some time as an undercover handler and bodyguard for Tony. At least until such a time where a handler is no longer needed," Coulson added, his smile somehow managing to grow even blander.

Ross let out a sharp low breath. "And how long will that take?" he managed out through his teeth.

"Who knows? A couple years at least."

"Be exact, please," Ross growled.

Pepper stepped forward, her own smile as pleasantly sharp as Coulson's was bland. "It will be when he manages to find a FBI approved wife to take over as his handler. So, twenty-five, perhaps thirty years, depending on how long it takes for them to find each other," she said sweetly.

Ross glared bloody murder at the pair for a long moment, his teeth grinding audibly. "You've got to be fucking kidding me. ..._This isn't over._"

Coulson clasped his hands together. "Of course not. In the meantime, I would suggest that you leave before I arrest you for trespassing and interfering with an FBI investigation."

"You wouldn'tâ€"

"I do have the authority to do that and that is what you're doing right now. So, try me."

General Ross rolled his shoulders and nodded his head jerkily. He signaled his team and they turned, making their way out.

"Oh! And General Ross?" Coulson called. Ross turned around and raised an eyebrow at him. Coulson gave him a smile and made his way over to him, pausing for just a moment to dislodge a tiny black device from the underside of a counter top. He took Ross' hand and placed the bug into it. "Take this with you, won't you?"

Tony smiled at the going-ons and glanced over Pepper's shoulder at Bruce. Bruce was still staring intently after the soldiers as they left, eyes wide and bright green. Tony waved at Bruce to get his attention and offered him a smile when he got it. Bruce frowned, which caused Tony to smile wider from contrariness alone. It wasn't long before Bruce couldn't help but smile back shyly.

Once the men were in their vehicles and definitely gone, the group let out a collective sigh of relief. Clint glanced between Tony and Bruce then turned his attention to Phil. "Phil, wasâ€|all that true?" he asked.

Phil turned back to look at them. "It will be in an hour?" he offered.

His children stared at him like he was crazy but they were admittedly impressed by just how crazy. Phil tried not to be flattered by that.

"It won't work," Bruce said with a sigh, looking contrite. "Ross will look into it and find out that you're lying."

Phil crossed his arms and shrugged. "It'll be four hours before he can even reach anyone with a high enough rank to verify it. I can have the paperwork forged in an hour and solidified in less than two if I can get the Director to go along with it."

"Do you think he would?" Natasha asked.

"He let me take in a preteen assassin."

Bruce glanced at Clint and Natasha with vague alarm and curiosity at that before he turned to Phil. "I'm much worse than that."

At Phil's raised eyebrow, Tony chimed in with, "He turns into a bodybuilding green giant when he's angry. Like Godzilla!"

Phil raised both of his eyebrows, Clint looked highly impressed and Natasha looked vaguely curious.

"How large is giant?" Pepper asked, setting Tony down.

"Um, I've neverâ€¦like six feet?" Bruce said.

Phil nodded thoughtfully. "Six feet's not bad."

"Butâ€¦"

"And you haven't hurt Tony and you didn't "get angry" with Ross and his goons in here, soâ€¦we'll handle it as we go," Phil said, reaching down to place a hand on Bruce's head.

With a nod at the group, Phil pulled out his cell and called up Fury. Despite the whole chemical experiment angle of their problem, it was actually much easier to get him to agree to let them keep Bruce than it had been to get custody of Natasha.

"Do whatever you want. I hate that fucker. The last thing we need is an army of his cronies with that much power. â€¦And you're not wrong. Kid needs an actual handler. Bring him in tomorrow for a debriefing and we'll work out the kinks then."

11. Interlude 7

****See the end of the chapter for the (very skimmed over) trigger warnings.****

****I have an awesome beta (QueenOfTheQuill)! And I will happily admit that half of my writing is specifically for her amusement.****

****Enjoy!****

* * *

><p>Bruce believed himself to be very good at reading people. He considered it to be his greatest talent aside from his mind. Between having lived with his parents and being an unwilling captive of the United States Army and its scientists, Bruce quickly found that it was a skill of immeasurable value and undeniable necessity.<p>

Being injected with the serum had only enhanced that ability. Though with the Hulk (and Bruce really needed to have a talk to Tony about that. He was in no way a superhero, regardless of what he'd managed to do thus far), Bruce found that he wasn't really body language that he was reading.

There seemed to be a constant low level thrum running just beneath Bruce's skin now. With most people, that vibration is more like a soft ripple in what was once still water, noticeable, undulating but still relatively ignorable. Other people, people like General Ross, made his blood feel as if it was boiling, his skin threatening to pull and tear itself apart from the force of the rippling as it moved.

But Bruce could handle it. With the exception of that one incident, Bruce has been handling it since he'd escaped. Bruce could handle the way that people made him feel.

Normally.

Normally, Bruce could sense a person the moment they entered the room or got within a certain range of him. Into which his new "siblings" made a vaguely amusing (if a bit alarming) game out of. He'd decided to just think of it as training, just the same as his breathing exercises. That helped.

Tony was always the easiest to notice. He sometimes likens the sensation of Tony to a shekere, a handheld gourd with a net of beading over it. The sound that it made in his head was usually soft shushing sound set to an excited beat. Fluttering and everywhere but nowhere near threatening.

Natasha was also pretty easy for Bruce to notice, to the former assassin's dismay. Even when she moved about him slowly, he felt her ripples like a shiver, a sudden rush out of nowhere that stopped as quickly as it'd started.

Clint was the best at hiding from Bruce. Clint was unobtrusive naturally in a way that Natasha had to be trained to be. When he stopped talking and got really still, all Bruce got from him was a faint ripple, like the source of the disruption was very far away from him. Otherwise, Clint in his usual state was a low thumping like a drum that quickly evened out before starting again.

Normally Bruce could sense a person the moment they entered the room or got with a certain range of him.

"Bruce? We're about to eat dinner."

Bruce closed his eyes and shoved down the shiver the threatened to rise up as well as the flash of green that always came when his heart picked up like that. He set down his book and offered Agent Coulson (Phil. Phil, he needed to get used to that) a careful smile. "Sure,

I'll be right there," he replied.

Phil considered him for a moment before he smiled back with a nod. He waited until Phil had left and closed the door before he curled up with a sigh.

Phil Coulson was silence. Bruce couldn't tell whether that was a good or a bad thing.

-xxxx-

It was a couple weeks before Bruce could bring himself to say anything. He considered talking to Natasha, but decided against it. While the fact that she had spent a great deal of her life as an assassin did make Bruce a little wary, he was actually more concerned about the fact that she was far too mischievous for someone that actually _enjoyed_ dad jokes.

It was really weird.

In the end, he chose Clint to speak to. It was partially because Clint was the one that got closest to Phil's utter silence (lending to the possibility that it might be a learned trait) and because he seemed to know Phil best.

When he mentioned it, sort of offhandedly so as not to raise any alarms, Clint had frowned at him in silence. "Can I get back to you on that?" he asked.

Something like quiet horror must have shown on his face because Clint leaned forward and stared at him in the eye with that unwavering sort of focus he had when he was serious. "I'm not going to tell him or anyone else. I just wanted some time to think on that. I need that sometimes. Is that okay?" he asked, his expression open and honest. Bruce's heart rate didn't even stutter or pick up the way it sometimes did when people tried to hide a lie from him.

After a moment, Bruce nodded slowly, earning a small smile from Clint. Clint gave him a light pat on the knee. "Don't worry about it too much for now. We'll figure something out," he assured. And somehow, Bruce did feel assured. Clint seemed to bounce between being a little brother like Tony and being an older brother.

Bruce imagined that Clint would grow up to a really good parent, especially compared to the rest of them.

-xxxx-

Clint got back to him just under two days later. Bruce was sitting against the headboard on his bed, absently reading through a biology textbook that Natasha had used her library card to get for him. Clint climbed up onto Bruce's bed and lay down perpendicular to him, his head on Bruce's lap. Bruce ignored him for a moment, waiting until he got to the end of the chapter that he was reading before he gave Clint his undivided attention.

He had to admit that it was kind of nice to live with people that were patient enough to let him do that.

Bruce set the book down next to him, carefully setting the red and

gold starred metal bookmark in his place before he close it. He peered down at Clint curiously. The blond smiled lazily at him, stretching his arms out above his head and stretching his back, lifting his hips with the curve of it. Bruce snorted and gave Clint two thumps on the stomach like a drum. Clint squawked indignantly before he relaxed.

"So, about Phil," Clint said slowly. Bruce frowned at him in confusion for a moment before realization dawned. He opened his mouth and closed it again, just rolling his lips inward instead. Clint nodded at him and then sat up so that he could sit with Bruce properly.

"I think that the other guy in there recognizes Phil as a non-threat," he said.

"A non-threat? What does that even â€" Clint, _everyone's_ a threat. To a certain degree," he added as an afterthought.

"But not Phil. He wouldn't hurt you."

Bruce frowned and resisted the urge to sigh. He knew that Tony and the others, especially Clint and Natasha, adored Phil but the man was still a government agent, one that carried a gun at that!

"Bruce." He looked up to Clint staring at him, all open and honest again. Clint scooted up closer to Bruce and put his hands on his thighs. "I know it's weird. And I know that you don't â€" _can't_ â€" get it right now. I couldn't when I first got here. Phil's not ever going to hurt you now that you're his. And you are. He likes you. And he is a smaller threat to you than any of us. That's what the issue is. I promise you that," he said seriously.

Bruce stared at Clint for a moment longer, finally breaking eye contact to look down at his book, as good a distraction as any. "Right, sure," he replied quietly.

Clint huffed out a soft laugh and rubbed his legs. "Give it a couple months. Trust me, okay?"

Bruce let out a soft breath and nodded.

-xxxx-

For all that Tony believed that Clint and Natasha were rocking the school scene, it really wasn't all that great. Natasha was incredibly pretty, not to mention exotic and mysterious at an age when jealousy and cliquing ran rampant. Clint tended to come off as protective of Natasha as well as anyone smaller or less popular than he was.

It wasn't normally a problem. Well, it was normally a problem, just not one that was often called to Phil's or the faculty's attention. Both gave as good as they got and made it very clear, very quickly, that they were _not_ above fighting dirty.

Natasha, for her part, was a good actress. She wore the right smiles and said the right things to make sure that the faculty never considered her to be a potential problem. She wore the mask of someone demure, a young lady raised in the way of propriety by her single father. So she was willing to admit to being confused the

first time a pack of girls from a different homeroom cornered her behind the buildings at the back of the school. Clearly they had no intention of inviting her to be a cheerleader as the letter in her locker had promised.

Just as well, she supposed.

There was then a great deal of posturing, of accusations of leading all the hot guys on and trying to get them for herself and of being all _sorts_ of dirty things.

They're not that good at it. She's heard worse.

So she let them ramble, absently going over which classes she had homework for that night in her head. Apparently, this was _very_ disrespectful of her. But, if nothing else, Natasha can honestly say that she did not throw the first punch. What happened next couldn't really be called a fight. While Natasha wasn't about to bring harm to civilian children, nor did she intend to allow them to harm her. Or to get away to tell someone she had.

The girls were forced to sit through a Russian-accent laden lecture that may or may not have involved a threat of undetectable food tampering, an infestation of locally found insects in their rooms, and the potential of disappearing under mysterious circumstances if they tried her again or brought this little misunderstanding to the attention of any adult.

It's possible. No one can say for sure.

Clint, for his part, was a quiet student. He didn't speak to the adults unless spoken to first. He rarely even bothered to start conversations with his own peers. Living with Natasha, with Phil, with Tony—well, Clint, as young as even he was, felt as if his classes were filled with little kids. It was a touch distressing at times, to be honest. While the other kids didn't seem to have a problem with Clint on his own, they did have a problem with him standing up for other people.

Clint blamed Phil's influence for that. He would not have considered pulling half of the things he did now a couple of years ago.

And, while both Clint and Natasha were relatively well liked among their non-hostile classmates, few were willing to risk the rage of their enemies by being friendly. So for the both of them, the brightest part of the day was lunchtime. They could sneak over to the metal fences that separated the elementary and middle school building and sit back to back while they ate their lunches.

On some level, they understood that school shouldn't be like that, that they should be putting in more of an effort to get along with assholes, to at least make those idiots like them even as they plotted their demise, but neither had the energy for it.

-xxxx-

On the day of what would later be called "The Incident," Clint had been waiting in their usual spot at the back fences for Natasha to get here. She was running a bit late, but he wasn't worried. Part of Natasha's good girl persona meant being willing to help out teachers

over her break every now and again. She would be, at most, ten minutes late.

So Clint waited, drawing little birds shooting beams at a building in the dirt with a stick he'd found. He was brought out of his work by the sound of people talking. That in itself was pretty weird. He and Nat had chosen that spot specifically because it was so rarely traveled. Clint glanced up and saw four boys, a little older than Natasha by the pins on their uniforms, coming out from around the side of the building.

"â€" far do you think we could get with her, huh?" One of the boys, a scruffy looking blond said, a wide grin on his face.

Another snorted. He rolled his shoulders in a slight stretch as he reached up to pull his black hair out of his face. "As far as we want, obviously. Just gotta make sure she can't talk after."

"I heard she roughed up some Second Year girls though. How're we gonna keep her quiet?" the third boy asked.

"We'll take some pictures. Make it look really bad and she'll shut up real quick."

Clint's eyes narrowed slowly from where he was kneeling. There was only one girl that hung out in this area at all and like hell did he intend to let them get the jump on her. He stood up and scaled the fence, landing on the other side with ease. "Hey, that's my _sister_ you're talking about, assholes!" he barked.

The boys startled at the sight of him. The black haired loser, apparently the ringleader of the group, stepped forward. He cocked his head to one side. "So _what_? What are you gonna do about it, _princess_?"

-xxxx-

Phil entered the administrator's office, taking a moment to look around briefly. In addition to the office staff, there were a couple of other adults there, clearly parents if their glares were anything to go by. He felt a hand come to rest at the small of his back and Phil glanced down at Bruce. Bruce's eyes shifted to the right and back to him again. Phil looked up, glancing in the indicated direction to find the school's principal, Mrs. Ross (he sincerely hoped there was no relation there), raising an eyebrow at him.

Phil couldn't help but hope whatever situation this was could be handled decently. He was still holding on to the hope that he could get Bruce registered for this place for the next school year.

-xxxx-

Phil was absently wishing that he could buy the school and just torch it to the ground. He could do it. Tony, and by Tony he meant Pepper, would lend him the money for it. He'd even make sure the school was empty first. Phil was _nice_ like that!

Because he had just spent the last ten minutes being lectured by a woman that was clearly more concerned about the school's reputation

than the fact that, even if Clint had done more damage, this was a four-on-one fight between a group of eight-graders and a fifth grader and there was something very wrong about the fact that it had happened at all. It was clear that she hadn't even bothered to ask what had caused the fight, simply dropping the hammer down and declaring Clint suspended for two weeks and implying that Phil should very kindly foot the medical bills for the boys.

Which, no. He'd rather let them take him to court and see how that worked out.

When it looked like she winding up to go into another long tangent, Phil stood up and clasped his hands together. He kept his movements carefully paced and obvious, both for the sake of the principal, who looked as if she were dying for a reason to expel Clint, and Bruce who, while surprisingly calm on the outside, was turned to face window to hide the way his eyes had been flashing from brown to green and back again.

Phil placed a hand on Bruce's shoulder to get his attention while he kept his focus on the woman in front of him. "I'd like to see my son now. The rest of this can be taken care of later."

Her lips thinned into a fine line but she nodded. "Bobbi will show you the way," she said, waving them out of the office.

The blonde woman at the front desk, whose name-tag actually marked her as the vice principal, gave them a smile. "I'm filling in for our receptionist," she said by way of explanation. "This way."

They followed her down a couple hallways to the nurse's office, by which time Phil's inner arsonist had calmed down a great deal. The vice principal seemed to be on same page as him, mentioning that having actually met Clint before, she doubted he was the type to do something like this unprovoked.

Natasha stood outside the nurse's office, her arms crossed and her expression cold. When she caught sight of Phil, she immediately stalked over to him. "They won't let me in there without an adult. The other boys are worried I might do something," she sneered out.

"They're not wrong," Phil admitted, wryly. It had the intended effect, earning him a small upward tick of the lips. She nodded once at Vice Principal Morse, who smiled back though both of her eyebrows were raised.

They entered the room and collectively cringed. Clint was pretty beaten up. A black right eye, bruises along his right cheek as well as whatever sort of damage warranted a thick set of bandages around his head, left ear and rib cage.

Clint looked up when he noticed Phil, a small slightly bloody smile appearing on his lips. Phil cringed slightly at the sight of it and Clint blinked in confusion then ran his tongue over his front teeth. "'s not my blood," he said.

Phil's eyes narrowed and he decided to just be comforted instead of alarmed by that.

He spared a glance at the boys on the other side of the room. Though their heads looked mostly intact, there was an amusing (for a certain definition of amusing) amount of bandages around their torsos and arms and legs.

He looked down at Natasha who was focused on them and wearing a feral grin, silently promising a pain much worse than what they'd received thus far if they touched her baby again. Ignoring that for the time being, Phil went over to the school's nurse, Janet, and started going over the list of Clint's injuries with her. A glance over his shoulder showed him that Natasha was standing in the middle of the room, preventing any glares from making it their way, Bruce having already taken a seat at Clint's side.

Bruce put a hand on Clint's thigh and leaned in closer. He kept his voice quiet as Ms. Morse was still in the room. "What happened? What did those guys do?" he asked.

Clint curled in on himself a little. His eyes darted in Natasha's direction quickly before focusing forward. He shrugged slightly. "They're just jerks. They were gonna hurt Nat."

Bruce glanced briefly at the group and then back to Clint. "How? I mean, it's Natasha," he said, though he understood the concern there.

Clint shrugged again, his fingers clenched in the sheets of the bed. "I don't know. Just they were talking shit, you know? Like they were gonna take pictures and that'd be enough to keep them from getting in trouble? Like that even makes sense?" he muttered.

Bruce blinked at Clint in confusion, brow furrowed at that. Then realization hit and his eyes went wide, brown bleeding away into a deep dark green. _**"They were going to do WHAT?"**_

Clint, Natasha and Phil's heads all jerked up immediately at that. Bruce's voice had dropped a full octave, the sound gravely and thick in his throat. Bruce's chest was heaving as he turned toward the teens on the other side of the room. He got up from the bed slowly like a predator. _**"You were going to do WHAT to her?"**_ he asked again, even louder.

"Everyone out," Phil said, his voice loud enough to be heard but still level enough to not catch Bruce's attention. The two women looked like they were going to protest, but Natasha had already dashed over to the nurse and grabbed her hand, pulling her along and grabbing the VP on the way. Clint hopped off the bed and as much as he hated these guys, he refused to let them get whatever it was that Bruce did. He started urgently waving them out as Phil positioned himself between them and Bruce.

"Bruce, you need to calm down for me, okay? I need you to calm down," Phil said, his hands up in a placating gesture. But Bruce's attention was still on the idiots who couldn't quite bring themselves to understand the urgency of the situation. Having a kid three years their junior not only beat them up but try to order them around did ugly things to their egos. The black haired boy scowled deeply at Clint. "For God's sake, fuck off you little shit," he hissed, shoving Clint away from him hard enough to send him crashing into a locked med cart. Clint gasped sharply in pain.

The sound Bruce made in response was nowhere near human.

Natasha was back in the room to shove the last of them out of the room and pulled the door shut just in time for them to miss Bruce's transformation. She stared at him with wide eyes, slowly sliding into a seated position against the door.

Bruce screamed something unintelligible at the door over and over that sounded like "I'll get you," though the words ran too close together to properly make out. Phil kept himself in front of Bruce, wrapping his arms around the transformed teen when he tried to get around him.

"Bruce, Bruce, calm down. They're okay. They're okay. No one's going to hurt them. I need you to calm down please," he tried, arms wrapped tight around Bruce's shoulders. Phil's dug his nails into the skin of his forearms in his efforts to keep from being shaken off as Bruce shook himself. Phil sucked in a sharp breath when Bruce started to attempt to yank Phil off.

Phil let himself be pulled back just enough that he could see Bruce's face. Phil grabbed hold of both of Bruce's ears and pressed his forehead against his. "Don't do this, don't do this. They're safe, I swear._ Please, please_, " he managed.

Bruce stilled for a moment and just stared into Phil's eyes. He blinked slowly, eyes brown for a brief moment and then green again. Phil let out a shaky breath and wracked his brain for something, anything, that could help right now.

"I can show you the worldâ€|"

Bruce's eyes narrowed, his brow pulling together in confusion.

"Shining, shimmering, _splendid_â€|"

The deep rumbling at the back of Bruce's throat had stopped but he was just staring at Phil now.

"Tell me, princess, now when did you last let your heart decideâ€|"

Bruce gave him the long, painfully slow blink of someone that thought you weird and kind of dumb. But when he opened his eyes this time, they were a solid brown.

Phil forced himself the entire way through a song he hadn't even realized that he knew all the words to and, by the end, had lowered himself down to the ground, Bruce mostly limp in his arms. Phil closed his eyes but continued singing as he ran his fingers through Bruce's hair.

Phil opened his eyes at the feeling of something pressed up against his side. He blinked slowly, a little blearily from the adrenaline loss, at Clint who was now curled up against his side. Phil looked over his shoulder at Natasha who was still curled up against the door, staring at them with wide, alert eyes. Phil offered her a reassuring smile and her expression fell into something wary, but

calmer. He raised an eyebrow at her and she shook her head, eyes flicking towards the door behind her and back. He considered that for a moment and then nodded, giving her permission to do damage control out there. Natasha stood up slowly. She stared at them for a moment and then came over carefully. She reached slowly, keeping most of her body out of arm's reach as she reached down and gave Bruce a single firm pat on the head before leaving.

After a moment, Bruce lifted his head up from Phil's chest. He looked in the direction that Natasha had come from, only seeing the door fall closed behind her, and then glanced at Clint. The smaller boy smiled and reached out, giving Bruce a light rub on his side.

"Non-threat. See?" he whispered.

Bruce blinked slowly and sighed softly. He let his head come down to rest against Phil's chest again, falling asleep to the drum of Phil's heart.

* * *

><p>Notes:

****Trigger warnings for attempting to attempt the sexual assault of a minor.****

12. Interlude 8

****Continuation of the last chapter. Pepper is amazing, Phil's decided that his emotional state has settled on 'vague alarm' in regards to ALL of his loved ones, and Clint meets a doctor that is actually a doctor but knows a doctor that isn't.****

* * *

><p>Phil exited the nurse's office with Bruce riding piggy back, his face buried in crevice between Phil's neck and shoulder. One hand rested on the arms Bruce had linked over his shoulders and the other held Clint's hand firmly. It was less as a means to keep the boy from running away and more to keep him stable. Without the help of an adrenaline rush, the mild concussion had left him somewhat unsteady on his feet.<p>

He found Natasha and Principal Ross in what appeared to be a stalemate. Natasha had her arms folded behind her back, her posture straight and rigid, while Ms. Ross had her arms crossed over her chest and was bent over just enough to tower over the girl. While Natasha's tone was completely calm if a bit cold, Ross' came out in hisses and sneers by turns.

Ms. van Dyne and Mrs. Morse seemed to be doing their best to calm the two down while also corralling the wounded boys, who seemed to want nothing more than to just go home.

The look of tense alarm that the boys shot them once they'd noticed their presence was almost worth new bruises Phil was sure he now had under his suit jacket.

"Natasha."

The girl looked up and over at Phil at the sound of his voice. "We're going now."

"Oh _NO_. I've already called the police. They're going to be taking your little ruffians into custody while they look into holding YOU liable for the damage that they've caused." Ross hissed as she turned to attempt to stare him down.

Bobbi's lips thinned at that. "Ms. Ross, I'm sure there's no need to get the police involved. Clint is a good kid--"

"Who needs to be incarcerated or institutionalized--" Ross started.

"Then I'm sure they'll have no problems meeting us at home," Phil said coolly, already making his way past the women, Natasha immediately on his heels. "You know where we live, I'm sure," he called over his shoulder.

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Once they were all safely in the car, Phil used the car's speaker system to pull Pepper and Nick up on three-way calling. It didn't take long to bring them up to speed with the information he had thus far.

"Well, that's unpleasant," Pepper said carefully. "It's weird that a bunch of boys would want to fight her though. I mean, yes, it's _Natasha_, but that's odd, right?"

Nick snorted softly. "That about sums up child behavior in a nutshell. Anything else you wanna tell us, kid?"

Bruce, in the passenger seat with eyes closed, spoke before Clint could. "They were going to assault Natasha."

"**"What?"** Phil, Pepper and Nick shouted as one. Phil had to swerve to avoid the three other cars that had somehow gotten in his way when he'd jerked his head in Bruce's direction.

"Wh- are you _sure_?" Pepper asked, her voice almost squeaky in her alarm.

Bruce's answering response was a soft grumble. "They didn't use those words. But they were going to "take pictures to keep her quiet," soâ€|"

Phil thumped his head back lightly on the headrest. "Is my license to kill valid in this situation, sir? Because I can turn around."

"Not unless they pull a gun on you."

"We can plant one," Natasha offered.

"_Guys_," Pepper said warningly. "No one is murdering anyone. I will take care of this."

"But--" It should bother Phil more than it does that he'd said that in

chorus with his children.

"_No_. I will take care of this. And I will make them wish _you_ had." That was followed by the soft click that signaled Pepper had cut her connection.

Phil hummed softly. "Well, that was ominous. And exaggeratory."

-xxxx-

It was not exaggeratory.

In the two months that followed, Phil learned that power that came from connections far outmatched the power that came from old money. Phil also learned that all of the people that he loved the most were fucking terrifying even by his standards.

Pepper launched a very in depth investigation, using her personal resources rather than her company's, that found that the group of trouble makers had a record. Not a fully documented one, mind. After seeing the wreck that a mere fifth grader had managed to bring upon the group, several students felt significantly more confident in stepping forward in the hopes that they may actually be able to get the boys suspended or even expelled.

It turned out that any of the (severely downplayed) complaints that were made to the principal directly were immediately dismissed. Those that went to the vice principal were investigated but eventually dismissed by the principal herself. That, of course, had absolutely nothing to do with the hundreds of thousands in donations that the parents of the group regularly made to the school. Vice Principal Morse had eventually settled for confining them in a boy's only class and might have done more had she been made aware that the threat the boys posed was more than poking and pinching.

Now that Pepper was assured that she could easily make a case out of the situation to counteract the knee-deep stack of lawsuits the various parents had left Phil with, she brought in her own lawyer.

Erik Lensherr of the Brotherhood of Community Support law firm.

Phil had long since come to believe that Nick Fury was unequivocally the most intimidating person on Earth. Which wasn't to say that Phil was intimidated by him; he could simply understand why other people would be.

Erik Lensherr gave Nick a run for his money.

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About a month after The Incident, all of the adults in the parties involved (the school's principal, the parents, their lawyers, Phil and Pepper) were brought together at a long table for what seemed to be a settlement meeting. They looked annoyingly smug and it took all of Phil's near-fraying self-control to not punch something. Pepper squeezed his hand under the table and shot him an assured smile that was almost a smirk. He was glad that at least _she_ was okay with whatever she'd planned (but hadn't told him about. No, he wasn't

pouting. Visibly, at least.).

Erik Lensherr, a tall, regal looking man in his thirties stood at the head of the table with Pepper seated at his right.

The man crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at the group before he sat down and clasped his hands together over his paperwork. He managed to look even more like the CEO of a Fortune 500 company than Pepper, which was saying something.

"The boys will be sent to a correctional facility for children and teenagers where they'll get their schooling under constant supervision until they reach adulthood. They will be participating in community service projects of our choosing for no less than 150 hours per school year. You will all be contributing a sizable amount of no less than \$30,000 each to a scholarship fund to help young girls in their pursuit of higher education every year as well as separate amount of no less than \$50,000 to the young girls affected by your sons' action. Ms. Ross will resign from her position at the school without severance or unemployment benefits and from this point forward will refrain, or else be barred, from applying for or taking any position that involves working for, with or on the behalf of persons of vulnerability, up to and including: minors, the elderly and those that would in any way be considered mentally compromised under the law."

As he spoke, Phil had the pleasure of watching the looks of their opponents faces grow from confused to alarmed to irritated to angry. Even the lawyers looked infuriated on their clients' behalf.

Once Lensherr had finished, one of the lawyers surged to his feet with a flourish. "You can't be serious. You don't actually believe that we'd accept this, do you? When the children of your clients were the ones that caused the most damage and started the fight!"

Lensherr tilted his head slightly and blinked at the man slowly, all predatory calm. He picked up one of the manila folders before him and opened it. "I have no less than 17 different girls on record testifying to being assaulted, harassed or threatened by those boys." With each sentence, he voice grew more and more frigid. "I have the testimony of your own vice principal stating that several dozen smaller complaints in addition to those have been brought to Ms. Ross' attention and were dismissed without investigation. I have the testimony of a boy noted in his file as exclusively aggressive toward bullies that your boys intended to have their way with his sister. I have video surveillance of the school showing them following girls into secluded areas and the girls leaving roughed up later."

"Mr. Lensherr--"

Lensherr rose from his seat in a sharp smooth motion, hands splayed on the table and half bent over to meet them all at eye level. "If this goes to trial, I am going to ruin you. Because I have had grown men with far more money jailed for less. And I am going to fight you on behalf of every single girl, or boy, that your children have ever touched. Individually. I will have them thrown in jail. I will have Ms. Ross thrown in jail for gross negligence. I will have every single one of you sued for so much money that these children

will own all of the assets that you have and have not reported. I will personally see to it that you won't be able to declare bankruptcy and I will get them controlling shares of all of your businesses if you try. And I will run your names through so much dirt that they will never be clean again. I will have you on every website, newspaper and network as the money-blinded monsters that would stand beside, that would raise, rapists and batterers and encourage their freedom from punishment. I will spend the rest of my life, pro bono, making sure that you never forget the names of those girls and that it haunts you to your graves." A slow smile crept across his lips as he finished, teeth gleaming and sharp like a shark that wanted nothing more than for its prey to dare come closer.

He sat down slowly, now right back to that predatory level of calm. He pulled a deep gray folder out from the stack before him and opened it. He folded the cover back and carefully slid the folder halfway down to the center of the table. "Sign it."

All but Pepper stared at the lawyer with wide eyes filled with horror or, in Phil's case, awe.

He was man enough to admit that he was maybe (totally) crushing on the man at the moment, barely managing to swallow the incredibly undignified sound that had threatened to come up.

Phil carefully glanced over at Pepper, who gave him a serene smile.

Suffice it to say, after some initial posturing, their opponents had taken the deal. Ms. Ross' subsequent absence left Mrs. Morse as the new school principal.

As nice as that was, he trusted the woman to do a great job with the school, Phil decided to move Clint and Natasha (and by extension, Bruce) to the school owned and run by a friend (lover? Husband? Sort of maybe crush? Phil wasn't sure what it was, just that it could not be all that platonic with the way they looked at each other) of Erik Lensherr, Charles Xavier.

-xxxx-

That, at least, was one problem solved. The other problem came about just days after the settlement.

Although Phil had reassured all of his children (even Tony, just in case) that they were in no way at fault for what had happened, Clint had become significantly quieter in the last few months since that fight. There were times where he ignored Phil, but the moment they made eye contact, he was all too happy to come over and be friendly again.

He wasn't sure if the boy was going through...preteen male problems or if he was simply playing hard to get with his affections. He had even tried actually asking the boy outright if everything was alright between them and had gotten a confused "Of course."

As if it was all in Phil's head.

One Saturday he woke up and rolled over to find Clint and Natasha standing by his bedside. After several long years he had managed to

fully wean them off sharing his bed. They still shared a room (and likely a bed) of their own, but that would be slightly less awkward if any social workers came calling. Phil's bed would always be open for nightmare nights though, at least up until the age of forty-five, he promised (his offer had been thirty. They had stared at him until they had arrived at a number "everybody" was comfortable with).

Phil sat up slowly and reached a hand out, making grabbing motions at them. Both stepped forward and allowed Phil to give them good morning head strokes.

" 'Morning. What's up?"

Neither child spoke for a moment. Natasha turned her head just enough to glare at Clint, causing him to tense up without even seeing it. He turned and gave her a wide eyed hopeful stare and after a long tense silence that Phil nearly fell back asleep during, Natasha grumbled at the younger boy and turned her attention back to their guardian.

"Something's wrong with his ears."

Phil startled awake, both by her voice and her words and looked at Clint. The boy was staring down at the near microscopic stars on Phil's comforter, running his fingers over them.

"Clint?" The boy didn't answer or even look up. Phil tapped him under the chin and Clint glanced up at him. "Clint?"

"Yes?"

"...Are you reading my lips?" He said it slowly but not drawn out. Clint nodded before his eyes flitted away. Phil tilted Clint's head to the side just enough to encourage eye contact again. "Why?"

Clint rubbed his ears with his thumbs and sighed softly. "Um...So, after the fight, my head was all...shaky and buzzy and weird? And I couldn't hear too well? But I figured that once the pain went away I'd be fine?"

"And this startedâ€¦|" When Clint didn't answer and he actually cringed instead, Phil's eyes narrowed. "...right after the fight, okay. And you were going to tell me when?"

Clint's eyes shifted away and rubbed his forefingers in circles around his thumbnails. "Now?"

When Clint made eye contact again, Phil raised an eyebrow. "Now, early in the morning, specifically just over nine weeks later? Or now, when Natasha realized you weren't going to tell me unless she forced you to?"

"Both?"

Phil let out a silent sigh and took Clint's head in both of his hands, using his thumbs to rub lightly at each ear. The boy sighed softly and relaxed into the touch, eyes half lidded in his relaxed state.

Phil turned his attention towards Natasha. "We're going to have to

take him to a doctor."

Clint jerked his head up, eyes very focused on Phil. "What! Why?"

Phil blinked very slowly and raised both eyebrows at the boy.

"Do we have to?" Clint amended, "I'm fine as long as I'm looking at you when you talk."

"What if we're in danger and you're the only person with me?" Phil asked in a vaguely alarmed whisper. "What if you're helping me fight down some enemy but they pull a gun on you from behind? What if I have to take a bullet for you because you couldn't hear me calling you to get out of the way? What if I _die_?" Phil asked with wide eyes.

Clint shot him a dark glare at the stupid and blatant attempt at a guilt trip. Phil sat up straight and raised an eyebrow at his son.

"If you can tell me right now, in all honestly, that that is not a thing that could ever possibly happen given the lives we live, then we can forget about having to go to a doctor."

Clint opened his mouth then shut it with a click after a long pause. He stared up at him and Phil could see the boy run through every possible scenario with that possible ending in his head. Clint sighed hard and blinked back an eye roll. "FINE," he grumbled.

Phil ran his hand through Clint's hair. "Good, because I spent a lot of time worried that you were ignoring me because you were angry or depressed."

Clint pulled the hand from his hair and held it tightly in his small hands. "_NO_". I didn't mean to ignore you!"

Phil squeezed his hands back lightly. "I know that. Now. Which is why you should have something before. Listen, I'll call an ear doctor and see if there is anything that they can do."

Clint nodded. Satisfied that her brother would soon have his issue taken care of, Natasha climbed up onto the bed and lay down, using Phil's lap as a pillow. Before Phil even had the chance to protest, Clint had followed suit. Natasha had the best ideas, after all.

"Okay, no. I need to go for a jog before getting started on my paperwork."

Natasha rolled over and buried her face in his stomach. She stretched her arms and legs out like a cat, taking up nearly half of Phil and the bed. Clint had decided to simply lie on Phil's legs so that he could grin as he watched the increasingly exasperated look on Phil's face.

"Off. Now. I'm serious."

"Hi, Serious! I'm Natasha."

Phil rolled his eyes so hard Clint actually wondered if it hurt. He didn't even need to see Natasha's face to know exactly what she'd said.

It was a phase.

It may or may not be Clint's fault.

Phil stared down at his kids for a moment. He took hold of the edges of the comforters and lifted it up sharply, causing both of them to be rolled off of him. Phil literally rolled out of the bed and into a crouching position on the floor before they had a chance to pounce on him again.

Phil dusted himself off and power walked to the door. He barely managed to make it out before he heard the soft thumps of pillows hitting the door behind him.

-xxxx-

It wasn't that Clint was afraid of doctors. He had no real problem with them; the FBI sanctioned doctors and the nurse at their old school had all been nice enough. He just didn't like theâ€¦_implications_ of going to the doctor.

If he was lucky, they would find nothing wrong with him. Which usually meant one of two things: that there was something _very_ wrong that wasn't quite detectable yet or that the issue was psychological. And that was a whole other can of worms that Clint wanted no part of.

If he wasn't lucky, then there would be something wrong with him. A vulnerability, a hindrance. Just another checkbox on the list of reasons why Clint Barton-Coulson was a total weirdo. Another glass ball to juggle with a smile. But more than all of that, it would make him a burden to his family. Coulson would obviously pay for the best of care, spending money on something that would be put to better use elsewhere. Tony, at least, had money of his own to pay for his care. He was also smart and creative as hell; any money that Phil spent on Tony would likely be paid back onto him within a year considering the smaller inventions that the boy was constantly sending to Pepper.

Natasha could read people, could act as an undercover agent for the FBI, and could provide all sorts of Intel in exchange for her care.

Bruceâ€¦Bruce didn't get hurt. Bruce was smart too, almost if not just as smart as Tony, and could eventually create something that could do great things for the world.

Clint was just Clint. And that kinda sucked.

-xxxx-

Clint sat so still on the cot that the wrinkly paper cover didn't make a sound as the doctor peered into his ears with an otoscope. The doctor paused and tilted her head around to glance at Clint's blank expression. Clint met her eyes for a moment, blinked, and went back to staring at the wall.

Martha Jones hummed softly in thought. She moved to get down on one knee in front of Clint. When she spoke, her voice was careful to enunciate the words properly. "So, are you in any pain?"

Clint shook his head. She nodded and propped her clipboard on her leg. "Any dizziness? Any nausea? Can you hear me at all? How long has this been going on? Has your vision been affected?" She wrote down his responses but made sure that she was making eye contact every time that she spoke. Clint immediately respected her for that. They'd already been to two doctors before being referred to this one and every single one had turned away while talking (because a kid coming in with sound issues is totally going to hear you) or had mostly ignored him and questioned Phil.

"I hear you waited quite a bit before telling your dad about this."

Clint shrugged. "Didn't hurt. I'm mostly fine, you know?"

She nodded and leaned in close but not so close that he couldn't read her lips. "Worried about the money, right?" She whispered. Clint eyes shifted to where Phil had taken a seat by the door. Since Dr. Jones seemed to have things in hand, he had taken to reading some magazine with a half dressed man on the cover that Phil was visible perplexed by. Clint rolled his lips inward and gave her a shallow nod.

"Someone tell you that you weren't worth it?"

Clint startled at that and bit the inside of his lower lip. "Notâ€|not recently. Not since I met him," he said as quietly as he could. He shrugged again. "Butâ€|I'm not? Soâ€|"

Dr. Jones stared at him with a blank expression for a long moment. Then she pinched his nose shut with her thumb and forefinger. Clint scowled and tried to jerk his head back but her grip was firm, leaving him to breathe through his mouth. She used two fingers from her free hand to point to Clint's eyes and then her own.

"I'm not going to sit here and tell you to work on your confidence, okay? I'm not going to tell you that you're worth it just because you're young or his kid. But one, he loves you enough to bring you here which should be proof enough because he doesn't look like a dumb man. And two, you love him enough to be concerned about how he spends his money. Enough that you would prefer to carry this burden by yourself than to weigh him down by getting help. That is selfless. Selfless people, like the kind that would seriously injure themselves protecting their sister, are worth so much because they help everyone. They need someone to help them back so that they can go on helping more people. So, are you going to let us help you or are you going to let yourself be helpless the next time your sister needs help?" Martha asked as she released his nose.

Clint couldn't help the slight pout (though he would swear it's a scowl) on his face. "Why do people keep guilt-tripping me to do this?" he grumbled.

"If you weren't so selflessly mature about it, we wouldn't have to," she argued back. "So?"

Clint rolled his eyes and nodded with a sigh, rubbing lightly at his nose and sniffing a little to get rid of the weird feeling in it.

"Attaboy. Let's see about getting you some less visible hearing aids then. And I don't want to hear a word about the price. I will box your ears, don't think I won't," she added with a stern look and a smirk.

"But I'm small and injured!" Clint cried at normal volume, making his eyes as wide and his expression as innocent as they would go.

Both Martha and Phil snorted in response.

* * *

><p>I like including random characters that I like into this. Who says it doesn't make sense?

13. Interlude 9

****Because it seriously, SERIOUSLY bothered me when I realized that I hadn't remembered to include one of my favorite people. Remedied.****

****Continued thanks to my beta Queenofthequill!****

* * *

><p>Tony had taken one look at Clint's new hearing aids and immediately made grabbing motions at them. "No! Let me make them cooler!"<p>

Phil lifted the spare hearing aids high above his head. Never mind that Tony wasn't even five yet and couldn't reach up to Phil's chest, let alone his head. "No. I've seen your definition of "cool" and we're aiming more towards "functional" and "subtle.""

"I can do that!"

At Phil's raised eyebrow, Tony turned to look at Clint, his expression completely serious. "I'll make them better. I promise, I promise," he said, one of his tiny hands rubbing absentminded circles around the battery in his chest.

Clint offered the small boy a smile and turned to look up at Phil. He nodded. After a moment, Phil sighed and surrender the extra hearing aids to Tony. He gave them both a pleased smile and darted off to the bedroom/lab/steel-plated gas-proof emergency room that he shared with Bruce.

Phil was both grateful and deeply, deeply, concerned by the fact that he even had a room like that. He reached down and carded his fingers absentmindedly through Clint's hair. The boy allowed it for a moment, even tilting his head back and lifting himself halfway up to his toes to lean into the touch, before he was darting off as well. To find Natasha, he was sure.

Phil took a moment to just stare off into space. He could already hear the muffled sounds of Tony chattering away with Bruce and Natasha probably testing Clint's new hearing aids with short beeps at various volumes. There always seemed to be something going on. While it could certainly be stressful and hectic at times, it was actually kind of comforting, knowing that there was always someone nearby. Even while relatively quiet, the house was still noticeably thrumming with life.

â€|Noticeably _thrumming_ with lifeâ€|

Phil's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Sorry! We're good!" Bruce called from the aforementioned lab before Phil could even speak, the vibrations easing until they were gone altogether. Phil sighed and resisted the urge to massage his eyebrows.

-xxxx-

Tony sat on a bench nearly doubled over the small hearing aids. It hadn't taken much effort to convince Phil and Pepper to let him use the better equipment and facility in one of the Stark Industries R&D floors. It was just a matter of allowing Pepper's chauffeur/bodyguard, Happy, to hang out outside the door to check anyone that tried to come in. Though being in the lab didn't seem to be helping as much as he'd like. He stared at the hearing aids, scowling, as he tried to think up a way to make the darn things better without a) causing an explosion (which, they're _hearing aids_, that should NOT be something that he'd have to deal with!) or b) hurting Clint's ears further with an uncontrollable volume.

And it turned out that being "subtle" was even harder than he'd thought.

Tony groaned deeply and let his head flop down onto table, a soft whine slipping out from the pain that caused.

"Rough day?"

Tony's eyes shot open wide and his head jerked up. He spun around and gasped sharply. "Rhodey?!"

The teen grinned widely down at Tony and fell into kneeling position as Tony scrambled out of his seat and tackled his friend. Rhodey let out a huff of air and fell back onto the ground. He continued to grin up at the little boy in spite of the fact that Tony was sitting on his chest.

Rhodey cupped Tony's ear, his fingers scratching lightly at the base of the boy's skull. Tony leaned into it and closed his eyes. "Missed you," he grumbled, the utter joy he'd once felt lessening some.

Rhodey used his thumb to brush some of the dark locks out of Tony's face. "Missed you too. No televisionâ€| or radiosâ€| or even newspapers that aren't guarded by like seven different soldiers on the army base Dad had us at. And it apparently didn't even occur to him to tell me that you wereâ€| well, you've met him. No

Distractions, and all that."

"Ugh. I should kick him."

"You should. He deserves it."

Tony snorted and leaned forward to rest his head on Rhodey's chest. "How long are you staying this time?"

"Couple weeks. No school, no training, nothing. I'm all yours," Rhodey assured, giving Tony a light but firm peck on the top of his head.

"Damn right you are!"

Rhodey gave him a light knock on the head with his knuckles. "Wow, _language_."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Natasha taught me how to curse in German, so I curse ALL I WANT without Pepper knowing!"

The black teen raised both of his eyebrows at that, because Tony was five and that seemed wrong. "Maybe less wrong than it had been for him to teach Tony the English curse words in the first place, but that just so he'd know NOT to repeat them.

And also because it was funny. But mostly the other thing.

"Who's Natasha?"

Tony's eyes lit up and he grinned widely and launched into a very long tale of everything that'd happened in the last two years since they'd met.

He really hoped that Tony had made half of this nonsense up.

When the story, filled with at least twelve more explosions than any "So, what have you been up to?" story should have been, finally came to an end, Tony led Rhodey over to his table and grumbled about his lack of progress.

Rhodey picked up the hearing aid and turned it over in his hand. "I think you're over complicating it. Some of the wiring is kind of reminiscent of headphones," Rhodey tapped his own ear with one finger, "You know, those really small ones. But we're trying to make audio device just the entire outside world instead of a radio. And Clint's young, so you don't want to make it so tiny that it's easy to lose or so large that other people think he's tuning them out. Maybe clear or skin colored with an earring attached to the end? So it doesn't fall even if it falls out of his ears?"

Tony blinked slowly and then slammed his hands against the table. "I should have called you first! I've been working on this stupid thing for a week!" Rhodey snorted and rolled his eyes.

-xxxx-

Rhodey nudged Tony's back with his knee when the boy fidgeted again, shifting a small box from one hand to the other then back again, opening the box, closing it and shifting it between his hands

again.

It was the sixth time. He'd seen men less nervous about proposing than Tony was about this gift.

The door opened and Happy poked his head in. "The other kids are here, Boss." Tony's lips quirked up at that, the way that they always did when Happy called him Boss. But it wasn't quite enough to calm all of that nervous energy.

It'd been a week since Rhodey'd met up with Tony again and they'd spent most of their time in the lab trying to get the new project just right. It was actually pretty nice to see Tony all worked up trying to make someone happy like that.

The three kids, really only just a handful of years younger than he was, glanced at him with expressions that varied from confusion to suspicion.

"Um, so. Yeah," Tony announced eloquently. He lifted the box, lowered it and looked away with a shrug. His siblings looked amused but unimpressed by the show. Clint, easily recognizable by the normal hearing aids in his ears, stepped up to Tony. He took the box from Tony, who now looked like he was second-guessing and regretting every single decision he'd made in concern to those things.

Clint opened the box just a peek and tilted his head to peer inside. He went still for a long moment before he stood straight and opened the box fully. Inside was one of the several sets of hearing aids that they'd made. The aid itself was a small clear nub with waterproof covering. Attached to it by a thin silver chain was the kind of silver earring that one would clip over the top of their ear. It was in the shape of a hawk's head. It was simple looking from far away but up close its feathers and even the hint of blue used for its eyes was visible.

"Um—so is it okay? I mean, we can get better ones. I think we made one that was green and had a dinosaur on it, but Rhodey said that was too much and I don't really even like dinosaurs because they're all clunky and weird and I could probably make it look like a car if you wanted, do you want that, cause it would be easy, for me and Rhodey, not the other guys but—"

Tony's speech jerked to a halt when he was suddenly pulled into Clint's arms and hugged tightly. He tensed slightly, unsure if they were in the middle of a "good job" hug or a "nice try, better luck next time" hug but relaxed when Clint buried his face in Tony's hair and whispered, "You're so awesome."

Even Phil had looked visibly surprised and impressed when he saw the new hearing aids later, a simple "Wow," escaping him.

But, as happy as Rhodey was for Tony, he could definitely live without the chorus for Centuries by Fall Out Boy playing from—somewhere—he still couldn't freaking figure out—every time Tony entered the lab for the next week.

****Summary: Phil comes to terms with the fact that there's some random deity out there that probably hates him.****

****(That deity is not Loki. Sorry.)****

****Also, just because I thought that they were cute bits of information: Ranunculus flowers mean "radiant" and Alstroemeria flowers mean "aspiring." They're all really very pretty.****

*** * ***

><p>Phil woke that morning fully expecting it to be an eventful day.<p>

The gym that Clint and Natasha took their stress relief activities in had scheduled something akin to a recital for one Saturday morning in the middle of July. The idea was to show the member's parents that yes, you had spent your money wisely here. It also served to try to convince any other attendee to send their own children there as well. Thankfully, the shows that Phil's family were coming to see were on the same side of the gym and one right after the other, Clint with his archery right after Natasha and her ballet.

Yes, ballet.

The gymnastics classes and the ballet classes were both taught by a diminutive Russian by the name of Madam Kalionova. If Phil was perfectly honest, he had to admit that found her far scarier than was reasonable for someone that barely breached four feet tall. Phil didn't even know if she had a first name. He hadn't checked. Somehow, he felt as if she'd know.

Three months into Natasha's gymnastics classes, the woman used a firm, almost vice-like grip to literally pull him aside when he'd come to pick the children up. He was pretty sure she'd left bruises.

"This girl will take ballet. I like her. She is mine now. This is fine, yes?"

No part of that was a request.

Trying to stomp down on the really just irrational fear that was building in his stomach, Phil's eyes shifted towards Natasha, who had come to stand not three feet away. Her expression was impassive but her eyes were wide and bright. She could probably smell his fear.

They both could.

"â€|yes?" Phil replied, not entirely sure he hadn't just sold his daughter. Or his soul.

So now, nearly nine months later, Natasha was dancing lead in their version of The Nutcracker.

Watching Natasha dance was really just a delight. She was already a skilled actress, trained to make people feel only as she wanted them to. But now she was able to use those talents to bring people joy, with the end goal being the joy itself, not as a precursor to pain.

On the other hand, Phil had been to see The Nutcracker with Pepper before and he was pretty sure that all the jumps and spins were done from more reasonable heights or included protective wires.

He was fairly certain that Kalionova put them in specifically for Natasha, simply because she could actually do them spectacularly and wouldn't allow Phil to bring charges against the place if she got hurt (which he would, because Phil was a rational FBI agent that feared no one. But, you knowâ€¦ after Kalionova retired. There was a long statute of limitations on cases like that).

Once the play had finished, Clint and Tony were quick to race to the dressing room area to congratulate her. Phil had even managed to hide a bouquet of red ranunculus flowers to surprise her with. He still had a bouquet of purple alstroemeria flowers for Clint hidden in a nearby food locker. Natasha accepted her flowers with a wide warm smile before plucking a single flower out of the bunch and offering it to her teacher. The stern old woman gave Natasha the barest upward flicker of the lips and accepted the flower with a nod.

Phil left the backstage area with Pepper feeling as if the worst was over. Yes, archery could be dangerous, but there was no risk of falling from a height or getting kicked in the face.

-xxxx-

So, it turned out that God probably hated Phil. It was possible that Kate Bishop, Clint's archery instructor, was the one who hated Phil, but he somehow felt secure in the belief that it was probably God.

It was the only reasonable explanation for why, after all of the other kids had done their targets, a stupidly massive obstacle course had been pulled out for Clint to run through. Starting from a _two and a half story high_ balcony, Clint made his way down the course. He jumped over balls, dived through hoops and swung upside down on a trapeze, all the while shooting arrows at a myriad of moving and still targets. All blindfolded.

Blindfolded.

Phil trusted his kids, he really did, but he was seriously beginning to question the ethics in this place.

A glance over at Pepper and the way she had begun to almost hyperventilate; to gasp then relax, gasp then relax, told Phil that she was having similar compunctions.

Phil made a mental note to call his mother and apologize for all of the times he'd worriedâ€¦

â€¦Why were those arrows on _fire_?

-xxxx-

Phil managed to hold off the clearly inevitable heart attack by pretending - _realizing_ -that the whole thing was done through CGI and special effects. There was clearly a green screen behind the obstacle course.

Clearly.

In fact, the moment he mentioned it to Pepper, she had seen it and steadfastly agreed to its existence. They were fine. Really, everything was fine.

They made it through that slice of torture with the knowledge that they had a nice, peaceful, grounded picnic planned for after the recitals. After congratulations had been given all around, Phil bundled his children into his Jeep and made his way away from the gymnasium with the careful ease of someone that was clearly driving under the speed limit and fleeing from no one.

Phil woke that morning fully expecting it to be an eventful day.

And if he had gone straight to the park, that would have been the end of it.

But, with the intention of treating and possibly bribing his children with all sorts of treats, Phil stopped by the bank to withdraw some money from his account.

Phil stood in line, sixth from the front, and allowed himself to stare off into space and finally calm down. There was a soft tug on the tips of his fingers. Phil glanced down to see Clint staring up at him. The boy's eyes shifted to the left and back again. Without turning his head, Phil glanced in the indicated direction.

Oh. For fuck's sake.

Three men, dressed seemingly casually, were standing at different points on the left side of the room. They shifted every now and again, a vague sense of nervousness all about them. On one such shift, Phil could see the barest outline of a gun, compact but not particularly small, down the back of one of their pants.

They were going to rob the bank.

There goes another point in the "Some deity probably hates me" column.

A quick look at the other children told him that they were probably well aware of the situation as well. Natasha had her hands in the pockets of her jacket and seemed to be shifting her fingers in a way that made him wonder if she was armed. Bruce was squatting closed kneed next to Tony quietly discussing exit strategies. Phil shifted a touch to the side and lightly wrapped an arm around Pepper's waist. He smiled easily and turned his head to whisper to her.

"Keep smiling. It looks like the bank is about to be robbed."

Pepper's answering smile was clear of any worry or concern on the outside. "Not by us, I hope?"

Phil actually had to pause and glance at his kids before he shook the thought away. They certainly would never bother with a mid-level security bank like the one they were in.

Wait, no. They wouldn't rob a bank in general. On principal.

Obviously.

Phil turned his attention back to Clint. "How many blow pops did you want to get at the park?"

Easily catching on, Clint smiled widely up at Phil. "At least four!"

"I'd like two. Blackberry and Caramel, I think," Natasha added with the same easy cheer as Clint. Phil's eyes shifted in the direction she'd turned from and caught sight of the two men, one Black the other Latino filling out deposit slips but glancing at their partners on the right.

"So, six. That all? How many can you actually eat?"

"Two, easy," Natasha replied.

Clint frowned slightly. He pulled a small handful of rubber bands from his pocket. "I could start three. But maybe only finish one," he admitted.

Phil nodded. He knelt down and inconspicuously handed Clint all of the pens that he kept in his shirt pocket. Pepper also handed over a small pack of unopened pens from her purse. "Tony, Bruce. Go play with the tellers, huh? See if they have anything nice for you to play with," he said, leaning down and slipping his badge into Bruce's hands.

Both nodded and rose to their feet.

They walked up to the counter at the front and went up to a female teller that seemed to be working on a report of some sort and thus was not handling any customers. She glanced at them, briefly and curiously, but paid them no mind until Bruce lifted Tony up onto his shoulders so that he was visible to her.

"Hi!" Tony chirped. The woman blinked at him and gave him a confused smile. Tony brought one finger up to his lips in a silent shushing motion. "This is really, really important, okay? Smile and keep your eyes on me, okay? Can you do that?"

She raised both eyebrows at him, her smile growing a bit wary. "Where are your parents kiddos?" She asked.

"Six, no, fifth down now," Bruce said, slipping the badge over to her as Tony waved his arms around and moved his lips without speaking. The woman stared at the two in confusion and opened the small wallet up. At the sight of the very official looking FBI badge (she's seen more than enough of them in her day working as a manager at this place), she stilled. She looked up to see the same man on the badge and Pepper freaking Potts shooting her a quick sheepish smile before she was turning to talk to the little girl with her. "Can you smile and keep your eyes on us?" Bruce asked again.

Megan Turner gave the boys her best Customer Service, I'm Really So Happy To Help You, smile. Both smiled back in response. "Do you have some small pins or marbles or pennies or something?" She nodded once and, rather than opening up the drawer, she reached into her pockets and pulled out all of the change in it.

Tony took the offered pennies and started to arrange them. "First, go ahead and press the panic button, there's six different armed idiots in here that look like they're getting ready to start something stupid."

When Megan startled slightly and moved to look around, Tony suddenly threw his arms up into the air and proudly proclaimed, "And then I threw it up THIS high! You should have SEEN it!" Megan blinked at him, more than a little alarmed at the subject change. Tony used his index finger to point to his eyes and then down to the coins. "Press the button and watch me," he whispered.

Megan put her smile back on and leaned forward like she was enraptured by Tony's non-existent story. She slipped one hand under her desk and pressed the button without taking her eyes off the kids. Tony arranged the coins to match where the men were standing. By the time Megan's manager arrived to see what was going on, she was deep enough into the act to excitedly show the man Tony's creation and quietly inform him of the situation.

Clint took in the six different men in the room as Natasha slipped away silently. He pretended to play with his rubber bands as he sized up the threat level of each of the men. He uncapped eight of the pens and quickly shot out six of them in rapid succession, two at a time.

One of the men went down with a loud curse, one of the pens hitting him hard in a particularly sensitive area. Two others were grumbling and hissing loudly, now bleeding from various spots in their thighs, arms or necks. Phil rushed over to them, the picture of parental concern.

"I am so sorry. I don't know what came over him!" Phil said, making a beeline for the man with the neck injury first. He ignored their shouting in his effort to 'take a look' at the man's neck. He casually delivered a sharp pinch to the man's neck, causing his eyes to roll back as he blacked out.

Phil gasped in alarm and slowly lay the man down on the ground. "Oh my God! I don't know what happened! Should we call an ambulance?" he asked the other potential robbers. Their panicked expressions at that told Phil a great deal about how much they cared about the other members of their group.

Phil glanced over his shoulder to see one of them men on the other side of the room drop like a log. It went unnoticed by both the patrons and other bank robbers, whose eyes were all on Phil.

That was two down.

No, three. She was faster than he thought.

"Let me help you take him to your car. I'll even pay for the hospital bills! Where are you parked?" Phil asked. The closest robber's face twitched in quickly disguised irritation.

"We- I don't have time for this!" The man barked, one hand going to reach behind him.

Phil, still crouched down by the fallen man, shot out a leg and swiped the man behind the knees, causing him to fall. In the time it took for the man's ass to hit the ground, Phil had darted forward, grabbed his own gun as well as the one at the man's back and then immobilize him by bringing his leg around to their fronts and slamming his foot into the robber's neck to slam him back towards the ground.

He had the safety on both guns unlocked and pointed in a flash. "FBI, on you knees!" he barked.

The remaining bank robbers stared at Phil with wide eyes before moving slowly down to their knees.

Just in time for the door to slam open and for actual police officers to storm in. Phil kept his guns pointed until the officers neared and began cuffing the men. There was a brief moment where he wondered why none of the officers even questioned the fact that he was the only visibly armed man in the room but then he caught a flash of red out of the corner of his eye.

Natasha stood off to the side, just out of the way of the doors, with Nick Fury crouched at her side. They seemed to be talking quietly to each other until, as one, they turned and smirked at him.

They looked way too damn amused to be involved in a potentially life-threatening situation.

Phil blinked hard in an effort to not roll his eyes and turned the safety back on for both guns. He handed the extra off to one of the police officers and made his way over to his daughter and her co-conspirator.

"Tell me that you at least left those guys where the police can find them?" he said.

"They're in some cabinets," she replied. When Phil's lips quirked downward, because those were not large cabinets behind the desks, she added, "They were unconscious. They may be sore later."

Nick gave her a firm pat on the shoulder which earned a pleased smile from the girl. "Your kids, Phil."

Phil chuckled softly. "They were pretty cool," he agreed.

Clint huffed from where he and the rest of their little group had walked up behind Phil. "Please. They were just seriously bad at this. No way we would've gotten made this easily."

Phil stared at his children for a long moment. "I feel like I shouldn't have to tell you that you're not allowed to rob any banks."

Because his children (most of his children; Bruce was the good one) clearly did not respect his authority on that statement, they glanced at Nick.

The man let out a soft hum. "When you're older, I'll let you pretend to rob banks as a training exercise for their security systems," he replied.

Phil glared at his boss. "You are a _horrible_ role model," he deadpanned.

Nick gave him a level look. "I'm sorry, _who_ was it that thought it would be perfectly reasonable to allow his children to confront armed bank robbers instead of calling the police?"

The two men stared at each other in silence for a long moment.

"â€|So, picnics are funâ€|" Clint offered, breaking the silence.

"They are," Pepper agreed, all too happy to end an argument before it started. "We're going down to Melway. Care to join us, Nick?"

Nick raised an eyebrow. "You can't be serious."

"Of course we are! The children love spending time with you," Phil said, an alarmingly evil smiling creeping upon his face. Nick narrowed his eyes at his friend before glancing down at the children who looked excited at the prospect of having him join them.

They were all cute and hopeful and horrible.

"Sureâ€|" Nick said carefully.

Clint and Tony grinned up at him while Bruce and Natasha looked quietly pleased.

Phil finally had someone the kids could force to run around with them while he got to relax. Maybe Phil wasn't so hated by the guys upstairs after all.

"We're gonna catch some squirrels and train them to ride our kites! You and Phil are gonna be bait!" Tony announced.

Of course.

15. Back in the Days - Steve, Almost

****This one was a bit of a doozy for me. It was supposed to all be in Steve's voice but I ended up falling in love with Bucky's voice, so it's mostly in his POV.****

****Bucky and Steve are about 14/15 at the start. The events of Captain America: The First Avenger are still more or less true, Steve and Bucky are just a couple years younger at the time of those events.****

****Trigger warnings at the end of the chapter.****

* * *

><p>Bucky Barnes' life began and ended at the side of Steve Rogers.<p>

They'd met as children in the grass lot behind Malloy's bakery. There

was Steve, stubborn and protective and filled with a grown man's worth of righteous fury on behalf of the three six year old girls that the twelve year old Granger twins were trying to push around. Then there was Bucky, stubborn and protective and filled with a grown man's worth of horror at the sight of the boy, who was seven years old as sure as Bucky was nine, and who was clearly going to get himself killed before his very eyes.

That seven year old was apparently _ten_ and _totally_ could have handled himself, thanks, but was nonetheless happy for the help.

The thing was, Bucky was a _good kid._ He was the friendly, helpful and smart kind of kid that the Sisters that ran their Catholic school adored. Steve, on the other hand, was a good kid but a really freaking bad influence, if Sister Carmen's opinion mattered to him. It kind of did; after all, she was the one that bandaged them both up (frequently.)

But Steve was a good _person_, even if he wasn't really a good kid. He was funny and smart and irritating and too damn stubborn by miles and _worth it._

Because that very first day they met, as Bucky pulled Steve shakily to his feet, the boy grouching all the while; he'd smiled at him. It was through bloody teeth and broken lips. It was somehow stubborn and prideful and irritated but _gleeful_ and _victorious_.

It was like seeing color for the first time.

Years later or even decades after that, if you'd asked Bucky what his life had been like before he'd met Steve, he would've answered, quite honestly, "Gray, I think. I don't really remember."

-xxxx-

Bucky stared down at the documents in front of him with something that he couldn't quite tell was horror or awe.

Identification papers for both James Buchanan Barnes and Steven Grant Rogers, marking both as eighteen years of age.

Considering that Bucky was just days short of 15 and Steve was only a couple months older than that, it was a bit of a stretch. Which wasn't to say that the ID's weren't good. They wereâ€|alarmingly good, of the "If he wasn't already pretty sure of his own date of birth he wouldn't have even questioned it" variety.

"Where did you get these?"

"I made them."

Bucky paused and glanced up at his best friend over the tops of the folders. "You _made_ these?"

Steve smirked up at Bucky, looking way too pleased with himself. "Yup! Took me a week and a half, but I think I did a damn good job."

"Okay. So, explain to me again why we aren't rich?"

Blue eyes narrowed slowly at him. "Because we aren't criminals."

Bucky actually had to close the folders, grab a chair, sit down and place the folders in his lap with his hands clasped over them to manage the weight of disbelieving stare he had to give Steve at that.

Steve tensed and twitched slightly, eyes shifting away and back as he ran a hand through his hair. "Well, we're not bad criminals, okay? Ma would turn in her grave."

"Yeah, after she finished kicking our asses to Jersey and back."

"So, you think it'll be enough to get us in the Army?"

"It'll get us a shot," Bucky murmured. He pressed the tip of his tongue against the roof of his closed mouth and curled his toes as tight as he could in his shoes, anything to release a bit of the trepidation that he refused to show on his face.

-xxx-

They worked even better than they'd expected.

For Bucky, anyway. Nothing short of magic wands and platform shoes was going to convince any army recruiter worth their salt that a Steven Grant Rogers of any age was healthy enough for active service. Part of him was relieved for the small blessing; seeing actual grown men both stronger and more careful than he was (or Steve was, dear Lord) killed, bleeding to death whole or in parts made Bucky wish he hadn't been dumb enough to agree with that plan.

Another part of him, small and treacherous and probably right, wishes that Steve had gotten though. Believes that just having Steve there, being able to see that stubborn, smug ass little smile, would have been enough to make him strong.

Bucky's won his weight in uneven battles with the strength of Steve's determination alone backing him, surely he could win a war.

-xxx-

When Bucky sees Steve again, and his brain is clear enough to believe that it's really, actually, him, Steve's over a foot and a half taller and nearly two whole Steves wider. Bucky's honestly not entirely sure whether or not he likes it.

Not being able to lift Steve up and over his shoulder whenever the older boy was being too sassy without breaking his back is a bit of a problem though.

(Not for long. Carter teaches him a good and proper fireman's carry. Steve spends a week glaring at her and then nervously looking away with a blush when she glares right back.)

When things were finally slow, as slow as an active war zone could ever really be, Bucky took Steve aside, pressed him up tight against

a wall, leaned in nice and close and then punched him low in the stomach.

They're close enough that he doesn't even have to explain what that was for.

Steve winced sharply and let out a thick cough (clearly for show, 'cause he's as healthy as an ox and the serum clearly couldn't cure assholishness) and said, "I wouldn't have done it if I wasn't completely sure it was gonna work."

Bucky narrowed his eyes at him.

"Reasonably sure. Howard _Stark_ was involved right?" When Bucky raised his eyebrows at that and tilted his head back to look down his nose at the blond, because they had both gone to that damn expo and Bucky was pretty sure blindness had never been on his buddy's list of ailments, Steve shrugged sheepishly. "Erskine believed in him. And he believed in me."

Bucky sighed softly and lay his head on Steve's chest, closing his eyes. "Can't say they didn't do a good job," he grumbled, though the irritation he'd been powered by seemed to have lessened a great deal. Maybe it was because it was looking at the finished product instead of the corpse that his friend could have been. Or maybe it was because

Bucky pulled back for a moment then pressed his ear against Steve's chest again. "I gotta say, I miss your old heartbeat a bit."

"Are you _kidding_ me?"

"Better than Mozart, classier than Holliday."

Steve rolled his eyes with a grunt but still let his head rest on top of Bucky's. "Your taste sucks."

-xxx-

Steve seemed to like Stark almost, if not equally, as much as he liked Carter. Bucky liked to think it was in large part due to the man's personality. (He was, admittedly, charming. Even Bucky had to admit that the man was fun to banter and flirt with for no other reason because he could. He was more fun than Carter was, but try telling Steve that.) There was also the fact that Howard didn't look down on them despite his power and riches and _intelligence._

Neither of them had managed to finish their schooling as earning a living wage took precedence, but they were by no means as _dumb_ or uneducated as some of the other men had expected of someone of Steve's size and strength. Nonetheless, the workings of an electromagnet pulse gun was a _little_ above their grade.

But Stark could sit for hours with them and explain all the theory and workings of his latest tech, could make even the most complicated pieces of nonsense sound reasonable, could stand on the range in his only half-together suit and show them new ways to shoot or holster the guns

â€|Could smile all warm and pleased like nothing else Bucky's ever seen whenever he made Steve laugh.

Bucky's smart; smarter even than Steve, who's a genius out on the field once he's got a target in his sights, but it took a bit for even him to get it.

"Still can't believe how far Steve's gone in all this; not even sixteen yet." He said calmly, almost too casually. He and Stark were standing against the back wall as they watched with something akin to schadenfreude as Carter more or less kicked Steve's ass from one side of the room to the other under the guise of training.

(He and the other Commandos took bets. Bucky was the only one smart enough to bet on Carter, no ties. He'd seen her grin at Steve, sharp like a shark, as they got into their training gear and realized there was no possible way Steve was going to beat her without a weapon. He'd apologize for not warning Steve sooner later on.)

Stark tensed very slightly and there was a soft hissed gasp then, his eyes shifting in Bucky's direction without turning his head. "He's eighteen," he said, though there was definitely some uncertainty there.

"He's smart, creative and good at art. He also said he was from New Jersey."

Stark's lips twitched up then down slightly. False information in his records and false records were two very different things.

Stark reached up as if to run both of his hands through his hair but stopped halfway. He rubbed his palms against his pants instead then folded them behind his back. "Does Peggy know?" he asked as he watched the woman in question tackle Steve low and hard in the stomach and use his surprise to lift him bodily over her shoulder to fall with a thump on the mats. Both men cringed in sympathy.

"Probably. Most likely? I'm sure Erskine knew, at least."

"And he justâ€|" Stark tapped the back of his head against the wall behind him. "Doâ€|do your parents know where you guys are?" he asked, sounding vaguely scandalized.

"Steve's an orphan," Bucky supplied.

Stark relaxed marginally then started. He turned his head to face Bucky. "Wait, what about â€"

"We're talking about Steve right now." His tone, while still friendly, was undeniably firm.

"Fair enough. How long were you planning to just let meâ€|make a fool of myself?"

Bucky's eyes went wide, his face a picture of childlike innocence. "What? But you're the Great Howard Stark! I was so sure you knew!"

The man's whole face scrunched up. "You are a brat of the highest

order," he deadpanned.

Bucky gave the man a wide smile and said, his voice soft and a little too patronizing, _"No,_ I'm _Bucky,_ Mr. Stark. You may need glasses if you're already mistaking me for Steve."

He got a sharp shove and the man's knuckles ground sharply into his head for that one.

-xxx-

For a long time, Steve could say without a doubt that he knew and understood what pain was like. Having experienced pretty much every other ailment short of the actual black plague, losing his mother and just being a stubborn mule with an honor streak a mile wide meant that one gets used to being sick, develops a high tolerance for pain.

Steve thought he knew what pain wasâ€¦ but then he lost Bucky. And the world became so gray.

He didn't cry right then, as he watched Bucky fall away, too far for him to ever reach. He completes the mission faster than even Phillips had expected.

He didn't cry later when Peggy, gentle but firm, offers her condolences and words of wisdom that he knows to be true, may later even believe, but is too tired and too full of grief to allow to take up room in his heart.

He didn't cry the next day when Howard took him by the hand and led him to one of the unused back rooms in the base. Peggy was already there, sitting in a chair up against the wall to his right.

There are over two dozen punching bags trussed up evenly about the room. Most are blank but some have photos attached to them, of Schmidt or Zola or generic masked goons. When he touches the bags, they're firm and much more rigid than the bags he's seen some of the other guys use. He allows Howard to wrap his hands up with strips of cloth and, at Peggy's urging, steps up to the first bag and throws his anger into it.

He didn't cry that day but, for the first time in what felt like years, Steve _gasps_ and feels air finally fill his lungs.

But, as any asthmatic could tell you, gasping and breathing are not the same thing.

-xxxx-

Even though he'd had a pretty decent idea of what would happen when his plane hit the ice, Steve still started at the sight of ice water rushing into the cockpit from the first breach. It hit him in the chest and he felt that chill right through to his spine. He stood up and walked towards the center of the plane, wading through what was by now a knee high pool of water.

He picked up his shield and sat down slowly, the water now meeting his shoulders. He wrapped his arms around the huge shield and took a slow deep breath. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to fall back

into the water.

Steve held his breath, lungs burning even as the temperature in the rest of him dropped lower and lower. When he finally forced himself to open his eyes, he was glad he did. It was getting darker, but everything was still bright and blue and sort of ethereal. He removed one of his hands from the shield and used it to rub at the center of his chest the way he used to when he was younger and was having an attack.

He gave himself a moment then opened his mouth and breathed, allowing the water to rush in and cool his burning lungs. His body jerked and his back arched, but he refused the urge to cough the invading out. Steve was nothing if not stubborn, body be damned.

After a time, his body seemed to get used to the feeling (or perhaps gave up trying to argue with him) and he felt himself starting to relax. Laughter bubbled through him and he closed his eyes, letting his head fall back to rest on the ground once more.

Steve didn't cry that day but, for the first time in what felt like years, Steve breathes and feels something close to peace.

* * *

><p>Trigger warnings for implied suicide.<p>

16. Steve

****So, here's Steve's chapter. Summary: Steve really only has three settings: Sweetheart, hero and asshole. For some reason people keep forgetting that last one.****

****I'll be honest, I got half way through the Thor chapter, got stuck on it for SEVERAL WEEKS and then, the moment I decided to switch to Steve, managed to write two chapters in two days.****

****What's worse is I have the Loki AND Bucky chapters planned out in my head and still have trouble figuring out Thor. Ugh. Any advice is appreciated.****

* * *

><p>Steve woke with a gasp. His head felt vaguely fuzzy but it took him less than three seconds to realize that he was in a bed that was unfamiliar, wearing clothes that were unfamiliar, and hearing sounds that were familiar in a very unfamiliar way.<p>

He sat up slowly and glanced around the room. It looked familiar but still somehow wrong. There was a soft click and the door opened slowly. A well-dressed woman entered the room and offered him a warm smile. She offered him platitudes and assurances of the allied force's victory.

And everything about her, from the curls in her hair to way her shoes were tied, whispered wrong.

Steve leaned forward and stood up slowly. Some part of her must have boasted strong instincts because she leaned back a touch in time with

his movement, a brief flash of alarm crossing her features.

These people had taken away his peace, had likely been part of the group that had taken away _Bucky._

And that just couldn't stand.

-xxx-

Nick Fury could honestly admit that he was pleased with how quickly Rogers had managed to piece together that something wasn't quite right. The records kept on Rogers had mentioned his memory and his tactical genius.

Unfortunately, they'd made no mention of his temper. Or his stubbornness.

There was an almost unreasonable amount of people stuck on desk duty at this point.

Fury glanced at the man _(boy, it wasn't public record, but it was _there)_ and felt the barest hint of unease. Rogers had spent the better part of the last hour sitting stock still and _staring_ at him. He had only blinked four times in that period.

While he was by no means scared of the kid, who was really only a threat to those that were threats, it was cutting into his work time. His gaze was tapping against the forefront of Nick's mind in a way that was almost similar to paranoia.

Like the only reason he'd yet to attack Nick was because he hadn't yet figured out a way to do so cleanly.

He supposed he could consider that to be a good stroke to his own ego if _Captain America_ felt that way.

Nick leaned back in his seat and closed the folder he'd been reading and leveled a stare of his own at the teen. "Would you prefer to be dead, useful or bored?"

Steve blinked slowly. "How many of those options are you actually giving me?"

"Two."

Steve's eyelashes fluttered low as if to hide the way he rolled his eyes before he looked away for the first time that hour.

"Useful."

"Let's get you something _fun_ then."

-xxx-

"Fun" turned out to be a series of _very_ classified missions for FBI and/or CIA. Steve only bothered to question how it was possible for the Director of the FBI to send him on missions for a separate organization once.

"The same way a _fifteen_ year old kid managed to take down a terrorist organization. I'm _very_ good at my job."

Which, okay, he supposed that made sense.

It made significantly more sense after their first mission together. Steve was deep underground in a terrorist sect, knocking people down and out and stealing any portable information he could find. (Flash drives, just so _helpful_. _No more jumbling with paperwork for him!)

Now there was just the issue of getting out.

Fury, of course, solved that problem by entering the compound by way of a drill, the thing strapped with both guns and missiles. It was a small drill, only large enough to seat one man, the driver, while Fury had himself strapped to the back, covered in minimal padding and also armed to the teeth to protect said driver.

Steve learned on the way out of that compound that by "very good at his job," Fury meant alarmingly, almost stupidly, reckless but smart enough to be so in a way that made sure that things worked out in a way that _looked_ reasonable on paper.

Steve could respect that.

-xxx-

The first three months after Steve woke up, he lived alone and reported to the FBI headquarters in NYC every other day. Mostly alone, anyway. He lived in a one bedroom apartment in a building that had other tenants.

Other tenants being field agents that thought they were good at pretending they weren't field agents.

(To be fair, they were _decent_ at it. Whoever had staffed the building had be careful to make sure none of them were people he'd seen in the line of work. But they were super friendly in the way that_ no one_ was in an apartment in the middle of Brooklyn. If anything, they were making him paranoid.)

And it had been _fine._

Steve did his job and kept his head low. There was no reason to actually make these people work on their down time, assuming they actually lived and slept there.

The first time that Fury had come to visit Steve at his apartment, there was a barely noticeable hitch in his step when he entered the doorway.

Which was alarming. His house was _clean!_ There was nothing wrong with it. There was even a potted plant on the windowsill.

Did Fury hate plants?

-xxx-

The first time Nick entered Steve Rogers' apartment, he'd nearly cringed. It was neat.

And empty.

Aside from the standard issue furniture, he was pretty sure that the only other things in the apartment were Steve's clothes (also standard issue) and that lone potted plant (with the damn tag still on it) on the windowsill. Everything was completely clean and dry, not even a drop of water left on the counter or in the sink.

Nick spent half of his weeks in hotel rooms and his own home was more lived in than this. If he hadn't known better he'd have assumed the kid had just finished his moving out cleaning.

He glanced in Steve's direction and moved to grab a drink from the (thankfully stocked) fridge. "How've you been?" he asked absently as he sipped his Coke.

Steve blinked at him in surprise. "â€|Good? Fine. Uh, and you?"

"â€|Fine." No one could say that small talk was one of Nick's strong points.

Steve stared at him, eyes slightly wide, and looked around nervously. "Pizza?" he offered.

"God, yes."

Steve managed to wait until he was halfway through his second box of pizza before he brought it up. "Is it the plant, Sir?"

Nick looked up from his third slice and glanced at the plant in question. He stared at it for a moment, trying to determine what could possibly be wrong with a plant. It looked healthy enough.

"Is it against regulations for the building? I could move it. Orâ€|get rid of it, I guess."

Oh.

Nick set his pizza down and sat back in his chair. "It's not the plant, Rogers. It's the whole place. You're _sixteen._ What are you doing when you get home that your place is still thisâ€|blank?"

Steve startled and looked around his apartment. He turned back to Fury and opened his mouth as if to answer the question but froze. His eyes grew wide and then his expression shuttered as he closed his mouth.

He wasn't doing _anything_ there.

"I'mâ€| just neat," he offered after a long pause. Nick didn't bother to call the kid out on what they both knew was a bad lie.

Nick picked up his pizza and took another decent bite of it. "After we're done here, go pack your things. I could use a roommate."

Steve let out a huff of breath that could almost be called a laugh. "Yes, Sir."

-xxx-

Steve's room in Nick's penthouse is just as blank and neat as his old apartment was for the first two weeks that he lives there. At which point Nick discovered that Steve's non-work related activities were comprised of eating and sitting crossed legged on his bed staring at a beige wall with no expression on his face for hours on end.

On the second Saturday, Nick entered the boy's room without knocking and dumped two massive bags full of stuff on his bed. Sketch books and electronic games and books and several honest to goodness model plane kits tumbled out onto the bed.

"Get a hobby and throw some fucking shirts on the floor or something; you're making me paranoid."

Steve's shoulders shook with a silent laugh. "Sure thing," he replied, already running his fingers over one of the sketch books.

The next time Nick went into Steve's room to check on him, nearly three days later it was certainly different.

The room was messier; there was an old box of pizza on the floor by the desk, two T-shirts draped over a chair, a pair of slacks half under the bed and colored pencils strewn all over the desk. Steve was seated cross legged on his bed drawing in one of the books.

Nick was actually a little impressed by the effort the kid had gone to make the place seem messy.

"The pizza box was a nice touch," he allowed.

Steve looked up from his book. "I don't know what you mean."

Nick just raised both of his eyebrows at the teen. Steve sighed and set the sketch book aside.

"Sharon believed it when she stopped by," he grumbled.

"Sharon hasn't known you long enough then," Nick replied as he went over to sit on the chair. He glanced at the shirts hanging off the back of it. It was just as he thought. "These shirts haven't even been worn. And you ironed them first. Do a couple jumping jacks in 'em to wear them out if you're going to try to play that."

Steve snorted softly. "Can't say I didn't try, at least."

It was a little easier after that. The kid didn't bother to pretend to be messy, but he did make a reasonable effort to develop new hobbies.

One such hobby meant that Nick got home from the office to find Steve in an apron, setting a full course of meals on the table.

Nick stared at the scene before him for a long moment. "You are not my wife."

Steve didn't even look up from where he was folding cloth napkins into birds. "Oh? Well, that's a shame. I guess I'm just going to

have to _throw away_ the lingerie I'd bought for your dessert."

There was a short pause before Steve froze, his eyes growing wide once he'd registered what he'd said. "Oh my god."

Steve couldn't quite tell if Fury was laughing or dying, but the man was shaking hard, breathing harder and actually had to lean, bent over, against the table for the three freaking minutes it took for him to catch his breath.

As interesting as it was to live with the kid, even Nick realized that Rogers was still basically isolated from everyone in their time. He was polite and friendly but didn't actually allow anyone to be his _friend._ Even _Nick_ had friends. Of a sort.

So, three weeks later, just over four months since Steve Rogers had woken up, defrosted and decades into the future, Nick decided that some immersion therapy was necessary.

If only because the kid was ruining his diet.

-xxx-

Phil Coulson was a fan of Captain America. A pretty decent fan. A big fan.

Okay, he might have a problem.

But that didn't mean that he would be willing to take in yet _another_ kid just because he shared a name with one of Phil's heroes.

"He doesn't _share_ a name with the guy. He _is_ the guy. Ended up frozen down in the Antarctic."

Phil pulled his phone away from his ear and stared at it. His eyes narrowed slowly. "You can't be serious."

"Would I be calling you otherwise?"

Phil massaged the bridge of his nose. "I can't even â€" When did they find him?"

"A little while ago."

Phil's hackles immediately rose, he could smell the BS even over the phone. "How long is _a little while_?"

"â€" A couple months."

"_NICK_."

"You didn't need to know. And now you do. He's better than he was before, but I think it'd be better for him to be around some people a little closer to his own age for a bit. I'm going to drop him off with you guys a little later."

Phil let out a sound that was almost a growl, causing Clint and Natasha to look over their shoulders at him. They were both seated on

the couch with Tony (unreasonably engrossed in a show about technical beasts?) and Bruce (reading and letting out vaguely interested hums whenever Tony talked). He offered the two a smile at their raised eyebrows.

"A bit more warning would have been nice. What do I even do with him? What do I tell _Pepper?_"

There was a soft sigh on the other end. "I'm sure it'll be fine," the man said dryly.

There was a soft series of dings from their doorbell. Clint got up for it immediately while Phil turned away to lean against the island counter. "No one gives assurances like you do, Boss. Where is he even going to stay?"

"Mr. Harper's son just bought him a condo in Texas, so he'll be moving out."

"Where do you even get the money for this nonsense?"

"Phil! Door!" Clint called out.

Phil looked up and sighed softly, just hoping it wasn't another solicitor. He moved his cell to his other hand as he made his way down the hallway to front door, which had been re-closed. "Hold on a sec, I just need to get this," he said into the phone before opening the door.

Which he promptly closed.

"Soâ€¦by 'a little later,' you meantâ€¦"

The call ended with a click. Phil pulled the phone away from his ear and glared at it for a moment before he opened the door again. Steve Rogers blinked at him curiously and offered him a sheepish wave.

-xxx-

"So you'reâ€¦ Captain America. Really?" Bruce said, directing the second part in Phil's direction.

Steve's eyes shifted over the children before him in confusion. "So, you're running anâ€¦ orphanage, then?"

"No," Phil said as at the same time as Natasha's "Technically." He shot her a look, at which she shrugged. "Phil is catnip for kids so whenever a dangerous child comes along, Nick convinces or allows him to take them in."

"No part of that is true."

Clint tilted his head back in Phil's direction. "So Nick _didn't_ convince or allow you to take us in?"

"Wellâ€¦"

"You don't think we're _dangerous?_" Natasha asked, looking highly amused at the very thought.

"Okay, yes, that's true, butâ€"

"So your children _aren't_ extremely attached to you?" Steve asked then with a small smirk.

Phil just sighed and massaged his eyelids.

"Well, it looks like he's going to fit in just fine," Bruce murmured from behind his book.

"Shouldn't you be dead?"

The group looked up in surprise and over at Tony. Instead of at the table with the rest of them, he was on the couch, kneeling on the cushions in order to watch them from over the back of it. Steve's eyes narrowed though his expression remained even, with no hint of unpleasantness.

"Yeah, that was my first thought too. Science tends to make everything more complicated, up to and including _dying._ Who knew?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "No way were you really asleep all that time. My dad looked everywhere for you and couldn't find a _hair._ So what's it been? Plastic surgery, a little Nazi cloning here and there?"

Phil tensed in his seat. "Tony," he started warningly.

But Steve was already standing up, eyes narrowed and staring down his nose at the kid. When he spoke, his voice was dripping with sarcasm. "Oh, your _dad,_ huh? Did I know him? I kissed _a lot_ of babies in my day. Don't worry, next time I crash a plane, I'll make sure I'm easier to find for him. Might be a bit late for that though."

Tony stood up on the couch and was leaning over it. "Well, _I think_ if you really _are_ him, you didn't even want to be found! Did you get tired of _helping people_, you poor thing! 'Cause if you were _any-freaking-where_ at all, he would have found you instead of wasting all that time!"

"Maybe he just wasn't _that_ good at looking. We can't _all_ be super smart, huh?"

"_Shut up!_ Howard Stark was smarter than a muscle bound idiot like you could ever _dream_ of being!"

Steve's eyes went wide at that, his whole body jerking back a step as if he'd been shot.

A weird, surprisingly wide range of emotions flitted across the teen's features, starting with confusion, streaking through irritation and stubbornness and _anger,_ and ending with despair. "Howard?" he whispered finally.

And, even though she wasn't there, all Tony heard was Pepper's voice. Pepper's voice the way she'd sounded the first time he saw her after his parent's death; he'd been in a bed five sizes too large with wires and cords and metal on his chest keeping him in place. He'd

been pale and shaky and bruised and bandaged. She had been opening the door to his room, a doctor at her side explaining everything that they'd had to do. Tony had whispered her name and she had looked up at him immediately.

She had looked at him, eyes growing wide and chest filling with air. She had looked at him and at the wires, metal and pain weighing him down. She had whispered his name and it was the voice of a titan, one that could carry the weight of the entire world, but had suddenly lost all of their strength. And, in the space of only four letters, he had heard all of the things she could never say out loud.

No. No. No. This isn't real. It isn't real. Please be okay, please be okay.

I can't lose you too.

For a moment, it felt like Tony's heart had stopped. He lowered himself down a little, resting his chin on the back of the couch and trying to rub what he felt like must be soreness out from around the battery in his chest. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, the "for your loss," going unsaid.

Steve must have heard it anyway, because his expression eased into something that could be mistaken for calm, even as his voice shook. "I'm sorry too. Next time—Next time, I'll make sure I'm easier to find for him," he said quietly.

Steve tensed slightly when he felt a small hand wrap around his wrist and touch lightly. He glanced over to find that Natasha had managed to slip over to his side without either of them noticing. She motioned him down and he went obligingly even though he wanted nothing more than to find his room and sleep for a couple yea—, hours.

Only to have her start petting him.

He glanced in her direction in confusion. She simply ignored him and continued stroking his hair, scratching his scalp and rubbing small circles along the base of his skull. It was actually kind of nice and allowed him to relax in her arms as she started to rub his neck.

And then he blacked out.

Phil surged out of his seat. _"Natasha, the hell," he said, making his way over.

Natasha slowly laid the super soldier on the ground and shrugged. "It's probably for the best," Clint offered for her once he'd made it to her side. He poked Steve in the cheek with his big toe as if to make sure he was really out.

Phil sighed softly. "I don't think he'd appreciate that."

-xxx-

He didn't. He woke up with a sense of déjà vu and sat up slowly. "The hell just happened," he muttered.

"I knocked you out."

Steve glanced over to see the girl walk out his closet. For some reason that he honestly didn't even care to know about at that point.

"Why?"

"Because I'm 'dangerous,'" she replied with actual finger air quotes.

"Okay. But _why?"_

Natasha sighed softly and crossed the room to sit at the edge of his bed. "I think Tony was worried that you were going to replace Clint as Phil's favorite. He's a fan of yours," she said, sidestepping the question.

"I don'tâ€| why would he think that?"

"He's _five._ And you're all _shiny."_

Steve sighed softly. "Well, can you apologize to him for me?" When Natasha's eyes narrowed at him, Steve sat up straighter. "I should apologize to him," he amended. "He probably hates me though," he said, slumping down a little. "I guess egging him on didn't help."

"You're right. That was immature of you. I was very disappointed."

Steve leaned back against his headboard, eyelids falling low. "Because I failed to live up to my legacy?"

"Because you're_ older than him_, idiot. I know you know better. And Starks don't love easy. It means you're someone worthy of awe."

His eyes opened wide. He blinked several times rapidly and ducked his head. He rolled his lips inward and turned his head away from her.

Natasha climbed a little nearer. She reached out with both hands and poked him hard in both cheeks, really digging her fingers in, earning a soft whine. "So don't screw it up. I have no problem knocking either of you out _as many times as it takes_ for you two to get your heads out of your asses. This is my responsibility as your older sister and I take it seriously."

"I'm _older_ than you."

"You say that like it matters."

Steve stared at her for a long moment. "You'reâ€|a little scary," he admitted. He couldn't quite tell if it was a good or bad thing yet.

"Aww! Thank you! You're a little scary too," she assured, giving him a light pat on the arm.

End

file.